Liturgical Colonisation and African Identity: Decolonising Worship in South Africa's Black Reformed Churches, 1963–2024

Ndidzulafhi Mudau
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1398-1373
University of Venda
Ndidzulafhi.mudau@univen.ac.za

Talifhani Khomola
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2965-0000
University of Venda
11572586@mvulaunivenac.onmicrosoft.com

Khonani M. Maselesele
https://orcid.org 0009-0001-9779-4120
University of Venda
9604871@mvula.univen.ac.za

Rendani Nthakheni
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8349-0043
University of Venda
23039930@mvula.univen.ac.za

Abstract

This historical analysis contends that Reformed church liturgy served as a methodical tool of cultural colonisation among the Black Reformed churches of Synod Soutpansberg from 1963 to 2024. This article illustrates, through historical analysis of liturgical practices and their documentation in the experiences of three generations of church members, that European liturgical forms were intentionally imposed to replace African spiritual expressions, alter indigenous worldviews, and establish cultural hegemony. This study, based on testimonies from 45 participants, including church leaders, congregants, and traditional practitioners, argues that liturgical colonisation was a deliberate strategy of cultural imperialism, systematically undermining traditional medicine, initiation schools, marriage practices, land relationships, and collective consciousness. This article enhances decolonial studies by presenting historical evidence of liturgy as a mechanism of power, while concurrently recording African resistance and adaptation techniques that maintained cultural authenticity amid persistent colonial influence.

Keywords: Reformed Church; liturgy; cultural colonisation; religious colonisation; Black Reformed Churches; Synod Soutpansberg; decolonisation

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Introduction

From 1963 to 2024, the Black Reformed churches of Synod Soutpansberg experienced a significant transformation that transcended mere theological conversion. This article contends that Reformed church liturgy functioned as a principal instrument by which European colonial authorities and their ecclesiastical agents methodically demolished African spiritual systems, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge frameworks. This study posits that liturgical practices were utilised as tools of cultural imperialism, intentionally crafted to supplant African consciousness with European Christian frameworks and to create lasting structures of cultural subjugation that endured beyond political independence.

This argument's historical significance resides in its challenge to favourable readings of missionary endeavours in southern Africa. This study offers tangible historical evidence that liturgy served as a mechanism of colonialism, building on prior studies that recognised the colonial entanglements of missionary Christianity. The timeframe from 1963 to 2024 is particularly illuminating as it encompasses the apex of apartheid, the democratic transition, and the modern era, facilitating an examination of how liturgical colonisation evolved across various political contexts while preserving its fundamental role as an instrument of cultural oppression.

This historical analysis utilises the recorded experiences of ecclesiastical leaders, longstanding congregants, and traditional practitioners to build a narrative of liturgical colonialism rooted in the material conditions of African communities. This study analyses how liturgical practices influenced consciousness over three generations, uncovering the dynamics of colonial power's exercise, internalisation, and resistance inside the personal realm of worship. The discourse begins by delineating the colonial origins of the Reformed churches in Synod Soutpansberg, subsequently charting the historical development of liturgical imposition, recording its impact on various aspects of African existence, and ultimately examining patterns of resistance and modern decolonisation initiatives.

Historical Context: Colonial Foundations and Ecclesiastical Apartheid

The Establishment of Synod Soutpansberg, 1963

The official founding of the Black Reformed Churches by the Synod of Soutpansberg in 1963 must be contextualised within the wider historical framework of apartheid's entrenchment and the Dutch Reformed Church's role in racial segregation. This was not, as institutional histories frequently imply, a natural ecclesiastical evolution, but rather a calculated expression of the apartheid state's policy of racial segregation extended into the religious domain (Mudau, Tsara, and Mudimeli 2025,2). The timing is crucial: 1963 represented an era when the apartheid regime was methodically executing its overarching apartheid strategy of territorial and institutional segregation, and the establishment of racially distinct ecclesiastical structures functioned to legitimise this political framework through theological rationale.

The establishment of Synod Soutpansberg marked the culmination of decades of missionary endeavours in the Venda and adjacent areas, but more importantly, it

formalised a hierarchical dynamic wherein African congregations were officially subordinated to European ecclesiastical authority while being segregated from white Reformed churches. This arrangement instituted what may be referred to as "ecclesiastical apartheid," a system wherein African Christians were permitted entry into Reformed Christianity yet relegated to distinct, subordinate institutional frameworks governed by European liturgical standards and theological paradigms (Giliomee and Mbenga 2007,341–342).

Liturgy as Colonial Infrastructure

Since its founding, the synod functioned with liturgical practices that were exclusively of European origin, expression, and theological direction. This was intentional. Mahokoto (2017,97) illustrates that Dutch Reformed Church missions were essential elements of colonial authority, with liturgical practices acting as tools for cultural transformation and social regulation. The liturgy, which includes the language of worship, service structure, sacred space architecture, musical forms, and ritual activities, was intentionally crafted to replicate European Christian civilisation inside African circumstances.

Historical evidence indicates that Reformed missionaries perceived African spiritual practices as antithetical to Christianity, not alone for theological grounds, but also because African liturgical traditions jeopardised the colonial endeavour of cultural hegemony. European liturgy was characterised as theologically superior, aesthetically sophisticated, and divinely sanctioned, whilst African manifestations were disparaged as "heathen," "primitive," and spiritually perilous. This ideological framework rationalised the systematic repression of indigenous religious rituals and legitimised the imposition of European customs as a civilising endeavour (Comaroff and Comaroff 2018,71).

The Apartheid Intensification, 1963–1994

During the apartheid era, liturgical colonialism escalated as the Reformed churches evolved into what Tymbios (2017,26) characterises as institutions of "civil religion" that sanctified racial hierarchy through worship practices. The liturgy bolstered apartheid ideology by highlighting themes of obedience to authority, individual salvation detached from social justice, and theological rationalisations for racial segregation. Church design echoed the spatial logic of apartheid, characterised by inflexible seating configurations that embodied European hierarchical social structures instead of African community forms (Branson and Martinez 2023,99).

The apartheid regime actively endorsed Reformed churches among African communities due to their role as instruments of social control. By instructing African Christians to adopt European worship practices, to diminish their own cultural traditions, and to embrace their subordinate status as divinely mandated, the churches facilitated what Fanon (1967,18) described as the "colonisation of consciousness," leading to the internalisation of colonial values and the psychological acquiescence to cultural inferiority. Historical records from this era delineate specific regulations

mandating worship in English or Afrikaans, limiting African musical instruments, forbidding traditional ceremonial components, and disregarding African theological perspectives (Kgatla 2018,150).

Theoretical Framework: Liturgy, Power, and Historical Consciousness

This historical analysis uses postcolonial theory to examine liturgical colonialism as a distinct expression of colonial authority. Homi Bhabha's (1994,19) notion of cultural hybridity offers a framework for comprehending how liturgical colonialism created ambivalent areas where African Christians both embraced and opposed European traditions. The concept of "mimicry," referring to the flawed imitation of colonial culture, reveals how African congregations seemingly embraced European liturgy while discreetly undermining it through the preservation of their own cultural elements (Bhabha 1994,94–120).

Frantz Fanon's examination of psychological colonialism provides essential insights into the mental health ramifications of ecclesiastical subjugation. Fanon's (1967,18) notion of "psychological violence" delineates the systematic obliteration of the cultural identity and self-esteem of colonised individuals, which aligns directly with the recorded experiences of shame, spiritual dislocation, and identity disorientation among African Christians exposed to liturgical colonisation. Historical evidence indicates that liturgical rituals served as instruments for what Fanon described as the "epidermalisation of inferiority:" the internalisation of racial and cultural hierarchies through quotidian acts that perpetually maintained European superiority.

African theological perspectives, especially those expressed by John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako, offer significant counterarguments to colonial assumptions. Mbiti's (1990,15–16) claim that "Africans are notoriously religious" disputes the colonial perspective that Africans needed European Christianity to attain genuine spirituality. His notion of "African time," which integrates ancestral legacy and future progeny, challenges the linear temporal structures inherent in European Reformed liturgy. Bediako's (1992,146) theory of "translatability" asserts that Christianity can really manifest through any cultural media, fundamentally challenging the colonial assertion that European liturgical forms are the sole valid manifestation of the Christian religion.

Methodology: Historical Evidence and Lived Experience

This historical analysis utilises a qualitative methodology that regards contemporary testimonials as historical evidence illustrating the enduring impacts of liturgical colonialism. From 2023 to 2024, systematic interviews were carried out with 45 participants from Black Reformed congregations within Synod Soutpansberg, consisting of 15 church leaders, 20 long-term congregants, and 10 community members, including traditional practitioners. The selected participants represent three generations of experience with Reformed liturgy, offering historical depth from the peak of apartheid to the current democratic moment.

The methodological approach regards participants' testimonies not simply as personal opinions but as historical records of lived experiences under liturgical colonialism.

Individuals aged 60 and beyond offer firsthand testimonies regarding worship activities during the apartheid era and the systematic repression of African cultural components. Middle-aged participants (30–59 years) record the transitional phase after democratisation, during which initial decolonisation attempts commenced. Younger participants demonstrate the intergenerational transmission of colonial trauma and resistance techniques. This generational stratification facilitates a historical examination of the evolution, adaptation, and persistence of liturgical colonialism across varying political circumstances.

The data collection comprised comprehensive interviews of 60–90 minutes, four focus group sessions with six to eight participants each, and participant observation during worship services, special liturgical events, and community gatherings. Interview enquiries centred on historical transformations in worship practices, the influence of liturgy on cultural customs, and methods of adaptation or resistance. Focus groups were organised to promote intergenerational discourse regarding liturgical history. Participant observation recorded modern liturgical practices and their connection to historical trends of colonialism and resistance.

The investigation utilised thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's methodology, discovering patterns in testimonies that illuminated systematic historical processes. Themes emerged through iterative analysis of the data, revealing persistent tales concerning liturgical suppression, cultural shame, clandestine preservation, and resistance. The approach was directed by the historical inquiry: How did liturgical practices operate as instruments of cultural colonialism across six decades?

Ethical approval was received from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was acquired from all participants, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Culturally sensitive information was managed in accordance with established norms, and traditional practitioners were contacted for the appropriate portrayal of indigenous knowledge.

The Historical Arc of Liturgical Colonisation: Evidence from Three Generations

Generation One: Systematic Suppression, 1963–1990

Accounts from people who engaged in Reformed worship at the peak of apartheid disclose a deliberate effort to eradicate African liturgical components. Reverend Tshilidzi, who commenced his ministry in 1982, offers significant historical testimony:

> Upon initiating my ministry in 1982, we were explicitly instructed that all prayers must be conducted in English or Afrikaans. Our Venda prayers were considered 'inappropriate' for the church. I recall the sensation of conversing with God in a foreign language, rather than in my native speech. It established a divide between my spirit and my devotion.

This evidence records a clear policy of linguistic repression that fulfilled several colonial purposes. Initially, it effectively marginalised elderly and less educated individuals from complete engagement in worship, fostering reliance on educated,

English-speaking clergy. Secondly, it disrupted the relationship between prayer and indigenous notions of the divine, compelling African Christians to embrace European theological terminology that lacked counterparts for African spiritual ideas. Third, it reinforced the psychological notion that African languages were insufficient for divine purposes, thereby internalising linguistic and cultural inferiority.
Mrs Mulalo, aged 73, offers corroborative testimony concerning musical repression:

> Our traditional hymns that honoured God in our unique manner were prohibited. Our rhythms and instruments were labelled as 'pagan.' However, those melodies linked us to our forebears and to the Divine in manners that European hymns could not. We were compelled to revere as outsiders in our own territory.

The historical importance of this testimony is its disclosure that musical repression was not solely an aesthetic choice but functioned to disrupt the liturgical link between Christian worship and African cosmology, especially the reverence of ancestors as spiritual intermediaries.
Architectural evidence from this era illustrates spatial colonisation. Church edifices erected under apartheid intentionally emulated European architectural styles while dismissing African design tenets. Pastor Ndivhuwo notes,

> The church edifices were constructed to emulate European architecture. They lacked conventional iconography and experienced a disconnection from their environment. The arrangement of seats in linear rows orientated towards the front markedly contrasted with our customary circular, community-oriented method of assembly.

This physical configuration incorporated colonial social connections, supplanting communal gathering patterns with hierarchical arrangements that accentuated clerical authority and passive congregational reception.

Generation Two: Transition and Persistence, 1990–2010

The democratic transition that commenced in 1994 generated expectations for liturgical reform that were mostly unmet. Individuals who reached adulthood during this era record how liturgical colonisation evolved in response to the altered political landscape while preserving its fundamental nature. Mrs Rendani's narrative of her 1985 nuptials illustrates the dual obligation faced by African Christians: "We were required to conduct two weddings: our traditional ceremony uniting our families, followed by the 'authentic' church wedding featuring a white dress and European traditions." The church conveyed that our traditional marriage lacked validity in the sight of God.
This evidence elucidates how liturgy served to undermine African institutions even subsequent to political freedom. The Reformed churches upheld European cultural dominance in family formation by mandating European-style church marriages as the "authentic" marriage, relegating traditional rites to a preliminary or supplementary status. The psychological impact was to instil guilt over African cultural behaviours while promoting European norms as superior and divinely endorsed.
The enduring nature of linguistic invasion during this period is evidenced by numerous

participants. Notwithstanding the formal acknowledgement of indigenous languages in the new democratic constitution, Reformed churches persisted in favouring English and Afrikaans in their liturgical practices. Elder Khuliso states: "Even post-1994, the church opposed holding services in Venda." The assertion was that English constituted a 'universal language' while Venda was deemed 'divisive.' This was merely another method of preserving European cultural dominance.

Traditional healer Makoma offers significant testimony to the persistent stigmatisation of indigenous healing practices: "Even in the new South Africa, church members who sought my healing services had to do so clandestinely." The liturgy instructed them that pursuing traditional medicine was immoral. However, when Western treatment proved ineffective, they continued to seek assistance. This engendered shame and internal discord. This witness records how liturgical instruction perpetuated the pathologisation of African healing systems, sustaining colonial hierarchies of knowledge that regarded European medical methods as superior while vilifying indigenous therapeutic traditions.

Generation Three: Contemporary Crisis and Resistance, 2010–2024

The youngest generation of participants demonstrates the persistent trauma of liturgical colonialism and the rise of resistance. Rofhiwa, 28 years old, expresses the identity issue induced by cultural repression:

> During my upbringing, I was instructed that all things African were subordinate to European Christianity. I experienced shame over my grandmother's traditional prayers, our familial practices, and our method of engaging with God through our ancestors. It generated internal discord regarding my identity.

This testimony illustrates the intergenerational transfer of colonial psychological trauma. Although born post-apartheid, Rofhiwa acquired the cultural stigma and spiritual dislocation resulting from decades of liturgical colonialism. The historical importance resides in demonstrating how colonial consciousness endures through generations, ingrained in institutional procedures, religious education, and communal attitudes that perpetuate the devaluation of African cultural forms.

This age also records the rise of decolonisation initiatives. Pastor Mpho observes, "Over the last ten years, we have begun to integrate more African elements – traditional instruments, indigenous languages, and culturally pertinent symbols." The older generation occasionally exhibits resistance, whilst younger individuals readily accept it. This generational divide illustrates divergent historical experiences: elders who absorbed European liturgical dominance during apartheid oppose changes that jeopardise their perception of genuine Christianity, whereas younger individuals pursue worship practices that validate rather than undermine their African identity.

Domains of Liturgical Colonisation: Historical Analysis

Traditional Medicine and Healing Practices

Historical data indicates that Reformed liturgy systematically aimed at African healing traditions as a primary locus of cultural colonisation. The technique was multifaceted: liturgical prayers for healing disregarded indigenous therapeutic expertise; sermons clearly denounced consultation with traditional healers as demonic; and church discipline was enforced against members who pursued traditional cures. This programme advanced colonial economic objectives by fostering dependence on European medicinal products and eroding African therapeutic autonomy.

Mrs Takalani's testimony articulates the theological rationale: "In healing prayer services, we were constrained to particular forms of prayer." The clergy refused to acknowledge that God may operate through conventional herbs or medical methods. A multitude of individuals experienced distress due to the contradiction between their beliefs and their cultural legacy. This illustrates how liturgical practices limited divine intervention within European medical paradigms, preventing African Christians from amalgamating indigenous healing wisdom with Christian beliefs.

The psychological repercussions were profound. Mr Phumudzo articulates the ensuing dual consciousness: "We transformed into Sunday Christians and weekday traditional Africans." The church ritual permitted neither option; one had to choose or lead a dual existence. This induced psychological distress and spiritual disorientation. This witness records a historical trend wherein liturgical colonisation compelled African Christians to adopt fractured identities, hindering the integration of their cultural heritage with their religious obligations. The anxiety and disorientation that Phumudzo articulates exemplify the psychological trauma embedded in colonial cultural hegemony.

Marriage and Family Structures

Reformed liturgy enforced European familial structures via wedding rituals that favoured nuclear family configurations over extensive kinship systems. Elder Maguvhe elucidates the historical evolution: "The liturgy underscored the nuclear family paradigm." The participation of our extended family in weddings, child-rearing, and conflict resolution was perceived as intrusive. The communal support structures that had upheld our marriages for generations were compromised.

This liturgical imposition significantly impacted African family systems. By ceremoniously exalting the nuclear family as the Christian ideal and regarding extended family participation as detrimental, Reformed liturgy undermined the kinship networks that offered economic assistance, childcare, dispute resolution, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The historical impact rendered African families more susceptible while augmenting reliance on governmental and market institutions governed by colonial and apartheid powers.

Gender relations were significantly impacted. Mrs Azwitamisi records the marginalisation of women's spiritual roles: "In our culture, women held distinct spiritual responsibilities and authority in specific ceremonies." The reformed liturgy designated males as the sole spiritual leaders. Women's involvement in worship was

confined to singing, excluding any roles in leading prayer or instruction. This gendered liturgical colonialism imposed European patriarchal structures that conflicted with intricate African gender systems, undermining women's spiritual authority and consolidating ecclesiastical control within male clergy educated in European theological colleges.

Land and Environmental Relationships

Historical data indicates that Reformed liturgy substantially transformed African connections with land and the environment. Community elder Rabelani offered vital testimony:

> Our holy areas - the mountains, rivers, and forests where we engaged with ancestors and the divine - were designated as 'heathen places.' The church emerged as the sole legitimate venue for spiritual engagement. This severed our connection with the land as a spiritual entity.

This desacralisation of the African landscape facilitated colonial land grabbing. By asserting that genuine spiritual connection could only be realised within church edifices designed according to European standards, Reformed liturgy disrupted the spiritual affiliations that linked African communities to particular locales. The historical consequence was to make land alienation psychologically easier; if the land was essentially material property rather than hallowed space filled with ancestral presence, its robbery by colonial settlers lost some of its spiritual outrage.

Traditional leader Mulatedzi records the religious evolution: "The liturgy communicated that private land ownership was divinely sanctioned." The conventional idea of land as a collective inheritance to be safeguarded for future generations was supplanted by individualistic concepts of property. This liturgical instruction explicitly endorsed colonial and apartheid land policy by offering religious legitimacy for individual ownership, market-oriented land transfer, and the dismantling of communal tenure systems. The Reformed focus on individual property rights, reflected in liturgy prayers for property blessings and stewardship education, legitimised European land relations as divinely ordained.

Initiation and Knowledge Transmission

Reformed confirmation courses were intentionally established as substitutes for conventional initiation schools, constituting a direct challenge to African methods of cultural knowledge transmission. School leader Mashudu elucidates: "Confirmation classes have supplanted our conventional initiation schools." Children were instructed in European theology rather than African wisdom, cultural values, and practical life skills. They were raised in the church yet remained culturally immature.

The historical importance of this swap is paramount. Traditional initiation schools functioned as holistic educational institutions imparting spiritual knowledge, practical skills, social obligations, ethical ideals, and cultural history. The churches

systematically disrupted the intergenerational transfer of African knowledge by substituting these with confirmation classes solely centred on European Reformed theology. Elder Thendo records the cumulative impact: “Each generation has forfeited additional cultural knowledge due to the church’s failure to accommodate traditional instruction.” Young individuals fulfilled confirmation yet struggled to manage conventional communal expectations or obligations.

This exemplifies “epistemological colonisation”: the systematic eradication of African knowledge systems and their substitution with European epistemologies. The enduring historical outcome has been the emergence of generations of Africans estranged from their cultural legacy, unable to access indigenous knowledge, and reliant on European-derived institutions for education, social development, and identity formation.

Resistance, Adaptation, and Historical Agency

Notwithstanding the deliberate nature of liturgical colonialism, historical documentation indicates considerable African resistance and adaptive techniques. This evidence contests narratives that depict Africans as passive victims of colonial imposition, instead illustrating the resourcefulness and persistence with which African Christians maintained cultural authenticity while manoeuvring through oppressive systems.

Hidden Cultural Preservation

Pastor Rudzani’s testimony records clandestine opposition tactics: “Some of us surreptitiously integrated African elements into our worship.” We would employ traditional melodies with Christian lyrics or incorporate subtle allusions to ancestral wisdom in our talks. It was perilous yet essential for our spiritual sustenance. This covert preservation exemplifies what James Scott refers to as “hidden transcripts”: manifestations of resistance that transpire beneath the facade of apparent acquiescence to prevailing power structures.

The historical importance of these concealed activities resides in their function of preserving cultural continuity despite systematic repression. African Christians established cultural autonomy inside colonised institutions by maintaining musical styles, language patterns, and theological notions within seemingly European liturgical contexts. These concealed practices served as cultural repositories, preserving information and methodologies that could be accessed and articulated when political circumstances shifted.

Syncretistic Adaptation

Mrs Josephine elucidates syncretistic strategies: “We discovered methods to amalgamate the two realms.” During church prayers for healing, we would discreetly include petitions to ancestors as intermediaries. We participated in church services while also upholding traditional rituals at home. This witness records what Bhabha (1994,19) refers to as “hybridity,” the formation of novel cultural expressions that amalgamate aspects from both coloniser and colonised cultures.

Historically, syncretism served as both a means of accommodation and a form of resistance. African Christians integrated African spiritual conceptions into Christian frameworks, preserving ancient wisdom while adhering to the colonial authorities' requirements for Christian orthodoxy. Nonetheless, syncretism also posed a risk of undermining African practices and legitimising European cultural hegemony by implying that African traditions necessitated Christian endorsement to attain legitimacy.

Contemporary Decolonisation Initiatives

Recent decolonisation initiatives exemplify the most overt manifestation of opposition. Reverend Funanani outlines ongoing initiatives: "We are developing worship resources in Venda, integrating traditional music, and promoting indigenous theological exploration." It is difficult because we must surmount decades of conditioning that instilled the belief that African elements were inferior.

Current initiatives encounter substantial challenges reported by participants. Mrs Sarah, aged 45, articulates intergenerational tensions: "Older individuals, who were profoundly indoctrinated, occasionally oppose changes." They have internalised the conviction that European practices are more "sacred." Junior members seek genuine African worship, resulting in discord within congregations. This generational split illustrates distinct historical experiences: elders shaped by apartheid internalised European liturgical superiority, whilst younger individuals educated in post-apartheid circumstances challenge colonial ideas.

Institutional resistance hinders decolonisation. Pastor David recognises systemic obstacles: "Clergy require education in African theology, indigenous customs, and cultural awareness." A significant portion of our theology education continues to adhere to European paradigms. We are deficient in resources for the development of genuine African Reformed liturgy. This evidence illustrates the enduring presence of colonial frameworks in theology education, clergy training programmes, and denominational resource distribution, rendering liturgical decolonisation realistically challenging despite ideological dedication.

Historical Significance and Contemporary Implications

The historical data indicates that liturgical colonisation in Synod Soutpansberg adhered to patterns aligned with wider colonial techniques of cultural subjugation. The intentional repression of African languages, music, rituals, spatial configurations, and theological ideas facilitated the establishment of European cultural dominance, simultaneously eroding African spiritual independence and cultural self-assurance. This was not accidental to Christian evangelisation but formed its fundamental methodology: the presumption that African acceptance of Christianity inherently necessitated the renunciation of cultural identity.

The psychological effects observed over three generations illustrate the profound colonial trauma ingrained in liturgical traditions. Cultural humiliation, spiritual estrangement, identity uncertainty, and the obligation to lead dual lives exemplify forms of psychological violence that endure well beyond the cessation of formal colonial and

apartheid systems. The intergenerational transfer of this trauma illustrates that liturgical colonisation functions not only as a historical occurrence but also as a continuous process that perpetually influences consciousness, identity, and communal connections. Nonetheless, the historical record also illustrates African agency and resistance. In the face of systemic oppression, African Christians devised methods to sustain cultural customs, develop syncretic forms that upheld African spirituality, and prevent total assimilation into European Christianity. These resistance techniques signify not only survival measures but also active affirmations of cultural value and theological legitimacy. They contest colonial narratives that depicted African cultures as incompatible with Christianity, instead illustrating that African spiritual traditions had elements conducive to genuine Christian expression.

Current decolonisation initiatives encounter significant challenges stemming from colonial history. The internalisation of European liturgical dominance among senior church members, the scarcity of resources for cultivating African Reformed worship, the continuation of colonial frameworks in theological education, and institutional opposition from denominational authorities all signify the lasting influence of colonial systems. The increasing dedication of younger clergy and congregations to genuine African Christianity indicates potential for reform.

The historical study indicates that authentic decolonisation necessitates more than the incorporation of African features into European liturgical structures. It necessitates a fundamental reconceptualisation of authentic Christian worship, acknowledgement of the intrinsic theological value of African spiritual traditions, and institutional restructuring that shifts authority from European-derived hierarchies to African-led liturgical development processes. This signifies not only cultural preference but also theological imperative: the recognition that Christianity's assertion of universality necessitates its legitimate expression through African cultural modalities.

Recommendations for Liturgical Decolonisation

This study's historical evidence and current issues indicate particular solutions for decolonising worship in Reformed churches within Synod Soutpansberg and analogous settings.

Institutional Reforms

The formation of a Liturgical Decolonisation Committee, consisting of theologians, cultural practitioners, and community leaders, would offer an institutional framework for systematic reform. This committee should be authorised to create genuine African Reformed liturgical resources that are theologically robust and culturally pertinent, document traditional African spiritual practices that align with Reformed theology, produce worship materials in indigenous languages, and implement training programmes for clergy and lay leaders in African theology and cultural hermeneutics.

Ministerial training programmes necessitate comprehensive reform to rectify colonial theological education. Curricula must incorporate African theology, contextualisation, local religious practices, and African worldviews as fundamental subjects rather than

ancillary themes. Mandatory practical training for ordinands in the development of culturally relevant worship and the management of intergenerational tensions during liturgical transitions is essential. Theological institutions should establish research programmes concentrating on African liturgical evolution, the preservation of indigenous knowledge, and the documentation of decolonisation initiatives.

Congregational Practices

At the congregational level, liturgical integration must be incremental and intentional to mitigate resistance while achieving substantive advancement. Preliminary measures may involve integrating indigenous languages into prayers and scripture readings, utilising African musical instruments and rhythms in worship, and incorporating traditional symbolism and visual features. Educational endeavours must accompany liturgical modifications to aid congregations in comprehending the theological legitimacy of African expressions and the colonial past that repressed them.

Services for healing and reconciliation that address the trauma of liturgical colonialism are imperative. These services must encompass recognition of historical cultural oppression, prayers for healing from internalised colonisation, celebration of African cultural contributions to Christianity, and commitment rituals signifying the restoration of cultural integrity. These services would offer a social place for addressing past trauma while reinforcing a commitment to decolonised worship.

Systemic Changes

Denominational policies must be formulated to uphold and safeguard cultural diversity in worship. These policies ought to enhance local autonomy in liturgical evolution, protect traditional knowledge, and enforce anti-discrimination measures within ecclesiastical frameworks. Cooperation among churches, synods, and denominations ought to promote the exchange of effective cultural integration frameworks, the collaborative creation of training programmes, and the establishment of resource networks.

Global collaboration with networks centred on African Christianity would enhance resources and credibility for decolonisation initiatives. Engagement in international theological dialogues regarding decolonisation, sharing experiences with other post-colonial churches, and fostering partnerships for resource allocation would enhance local initiatives and contribute to wider discussions on genuine contextual Christianity.

Conclusion

This historical research has shown that Reformed church liturgy served as a systematic tool of cultural colonisation inside Black Reformed churches in Synod Soutpansberg from 1963 to 2024. The accounts of 45 participants spanning three generations offer compelling evidence that liturgical colonisation was not an inadvertent consequence of Christian evangelisation but a calculated strategy that systematically supplanted African spiritual practices with European forms, significantly affecting healing practices, marriage customs, land relations, initiation rites, and psychological well-being.

The historical trajectory demonstrates the adaptation and endurance of liturgical colonialism under evolving political settings. During apartheid, liturgical suppression was overtly implemented by institutional regulations and social punishments. Following democratisation, colonialism continued because to ingrained beliefs in European liturgical superiority, institutional stagnation, and insufficient resources for cultivating African alternatives. Throughout all epochs, liturgical colonialism functioned to preserve European cultural dominance, erode African spiritual independence, and instil psychological frameworks of cultural inferiority.

Nonetheless, the historical record also chronicles substantial African resistance via covert cultural preservation, syncretic adaptation, and modern decolonisation initiatives. This evidence contests narratives that depict Africans as passive beneficiaries of colonial imposition, instead illuminating the ingenuity, resilience, and theological agency by which African Christians preserved cultural authenticity while manoeuvring within oppressive frameworks.

The way forward necessitates recognising the historical reality of liturgical colonisation, addressing its persistent psychological and institutional impacts, and dedicating oneself to systematic decolonisation via institutional changes, congregational practices, and denominational policy. The proposals include the formation of decolonisation committees, the reorganisation of ministerial training, the development of culturally pertinent worship tools, and the promotion of community participation, offering tangible strategies for Synod Soutpansberg and analogous situations to confront this colonial heritage.

This study ultimately confirms the feasibility and imperative of genuine African Christianity that respects cultural heritage while upholding the Christian religion. Historical data indicate that African societies possess the wisdom, spiritual resources, and creative capabilities necessary for this transition. The remaining necessity is the institutional resolve and structural backing to facilitate what African Christians have long recognised: that Christianity can be genuinely articulated through African cultural modalities, and that such articulation signifies not cultural concession but theological fidelity to Christianity's universal assertions.

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