Epistemic Decolonisation through Musical Reclamation: A Literary Analysis of Indigenous Music and Reformed Worship in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

Talifhani Khomola
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2965-0000
University of Venda, South Africa
wawe1khomo@gmail.com

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

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

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

Abstract

This study examines epistemic decolonisation through musical reclamation within the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) via a comprehensive literary analysis of ecclesiastical texts. The study employs postcolonial literary techniques to examine liturgical records, hymnographic texts, missionary correspondence, and contemporary theological writings from the mid-nineteenth century to the present time, in the context of decolonial initiatives. The analysis illustrates the systematic imposition of Scottish Presbyterian musical traditions on African congregations through complex textual strategies that marginalised indigenous musical knowledge systems, notably by suppressing African rhythmic patterns, indigenous hymnody exemplified by *Incwadi Yamaculo amaXhosa* (1929), and traditional musical instruments. This study employed a contrapuntal analysis of religious materials to demonstrate how colonial missionary writings established hierarchical distinctions between European and African musical practices, so constructing discursive frameworks that continue to influence contemporary worship. The article outlines three distinct approaches for musical decolonisation within UPCSA materials: progressive textual integration, radical textual modification, and contextual textual adaptation. The findings indicate that successful decolonisation requires not only practical liturgical changes but also a

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fundamental transformation of the textual structures that influence church practice.

Keywords: decolonisation; Reformed theology; indigenous music; Presbyterian Church history; postcolonial theory; liturgical studies; South African church history

Introduction

The religious landscape of Southern Africa illustrates the complex interplay between European missionary endeavours and indigenous African spiritual traditions. The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA), formed in 1999 through the merger of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, exemplifies a significant case study for analysing the interplay of cultural interaction, colonial imposition, and contemporary decolonial aspirations within the Reformed tradition (Mushayavanhu and Duncan 2014, 2). The matter of musical expression in Christian worship has emerged as a crucial domain for examining broader patterns of cultural colonialism and resistance within Southern African ecclesiastical history (Vellem 2019, 50). This work advances the burgeoning area of church historical studies by examining decolonial processes in Southern African Christianity, particularly focusing on the dynamics of musical colonisation and decolonisation as depicted through literary representation. This important strategy recognises that colonial power operated primarily through discursive production rather than merely through institutional control. Edward Said demonstrated in his important analysis of Orientalism that colonial authority fundamentally depends on the depiction of colonised individuals and their actions in written discourse (Said 2014).

The enquiries guiding this study are: How did the writings of nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian missionaries create hierarchical connections between European and African musical traditions? What linguistic strategies do modern UPCSA tools employ to decolonise musical worship? How do these textual modifications clarify the broader patterns of epistemic decolonisation within the Reformed tradition?

Historical Context: Presbyterian Missions and Musical Colonisation

The Scottish Presbyterian Missionary Enterprise

The arrival of Scottish Presbyterian missionaries in Southern Africa during the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a deliberate effort to establish Reformed doctrinal and liturgical traditions within African contexts. These missionary efforts operated inside vast imperial frameworks that assumed the superiority of European culture and religion. The ideology underpinning the civilising mission that directed much of the nineteenth-century missionary efforts explicitly linked Christian evangelism to the replacement of indigenous cultural traditions with European equivalents (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). The 1847 Annual Report of the Scottish Missionary Society illustrates this colonial musical narrative, asserting that indigenous

rhythmic traditions need a progressive substitution with European psalmody (Scottish Missionary Society 1847). This text exemplifies several core colonial assumptions: the pathologisation of African rhythm as excessive and inappropriate, the establishment of a hierarchical dichotomy between African and European worship, and the civilising mission narrative that posits the moral and theological superiority of European musical forms.

Textual Mechanisms of Musical Colonisation

The incursion of African musical traditions transpired through several literary techniques that reinforced European musical supremacy. The 1863 *Handbook for Missionaries in Kaffraria*, issued by the Free Church of Scotland, exemplifies these literary methods by explicitly forbidding the inclusion of indigenous instruments and musical traditions in Christian worship (Free Church of Scotland 1863). This illustrates the distinct Scottish missionary traditions of exclusive psalmody and regulated congregational singing that defined Free Church practice in Scotland, particularly their emphasis on unaccompanied psalm singing and the rejection of instrumental music in church. The intricacy of these literary techniques is apparent when analysing their rhetorical framework. The continual use of medical and pathological terminology to describe African musical practices created frameworks that portrayed indigenous traditions as expressions of cultural and spiritual ailments requiring European intervention (Alexander 2021). The 1870 Report from Lovedale Mission, written after James Stewart became principal, describes African musical expression as needing continuous pedagogical intervention (Stewart 1870).

Hymnographic Colonisation and Cultural Displacement

The use of Scottish Presbyterian hymnals in African missionary contexts exemplifies a complex form of cultural colonialism. The 1889 *Hymnal for African Missions*, issued by the Presbyterian missionary publishing business in Edinburgh, asserts in its preface that songs were chosen for their doctrinal integrity and melodic simplicity (*Hymnal for African Missions* 1889). Scottish missionary traditions encompassed the sole utilisation of metrical psalms, the ban on indigenous musical instruments like drums and rattles, and the imposition of European harmonic frameworks. The structure of these hymnbooks reinforces colonial hierarchies by organising them based on European liturgical seasons, theological themes, and musical criteria. The hymnbooks do not acknowledge African seasonal cycles, indigenous religious concepts, or traditional musical frameworks, including call-and-response rhythms, polyrhythmic structures, and microtonal vocal techniques typical of Xhosa and Zulu musical traditions (UPCSA 2018b). The exclusive dependence on European musical notation renders African microtonal traditions and rhythmic complexities practically unwritable within the current textual framework. Notably, these colonial hymnbooks did not accommodate indigenous hymnody, which would subsequently be compiled in works like *Incwadi Yamaculo amaXhosa* (1929), the hymnbook of the Bantu Presbyterian Church of South

Africa, exemplifying a vital partnership between missionary and indigenous leadership in safeguarding Xhosa Christian musical traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Literary Theory and Ecclesiastical Analysis

This study employs postcolonial literary theory as its primary analytical framework, which is particularly well-suited for ecclesiastical historical research. Edward Said's groundbreaking investigation of Orientalism offers vital insight into the dynamics of colonial control, which act through discursive creation rather than just through institutional supremacy (Said 1978). Gayatri Spivak's important essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" gives a theoretical framework for evaluating the marginalisation of African musical knowledge within colonial discourse and for finding possibilities to restore these suppressed voices (Spivak 1988).

Contrapuntal Reading Methodology

This study employs contrapuntal reading as its primary analytical instrument, referencing Said's later methodological developments in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). Contrapuntal reading examines the interplay of dominant and marginalised voices within a single cultural work, revealing tensions, contradictions, and possibilities for alternative interpretations that challenge hegemonic readings. Contrapuntal reading, designed for ecclesiastical textual analysis, uncovers multiple layers of significance within UPCSA liturgical materials: the overt content of hymnals, liturgical instructions, and official worship resources that publicly support Scottish Presbyterian musical traditions while sidelining or eradicating African musical forms; and the implicit assumptions, significant omissions, and unacknowledged tensions in ecclesiastical texts that create avenues for indigenous musical resistance and alternative theological interpretations.

Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Transformation

The study's theoretical framework incorporates viewpoints from decolonial theory, particularly the concept of epistemic decolonisation as defined by researchers such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Ramón Grosfoguel (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000). In ecclesiastical contexts, epistemic decolonisation acknowledges that colonial power has influenced the management of epistemological frameworks, thereby determining what constitutes valid theological knowledge, acceptable worship practices, and authentic cultural expressions within Christian environments (Boesak 1977). Decolonial theory rejects Western approval or moderation, and asserts that Africans should affirm their humanity without seeking validation from the West (Boesak 1977; Vellem 2017).

Methodological Framework

This study employs a purely literary methodology to examine musical decolonisation inside the UPCSA. This methodological choice achieves several important aims. First, colonial discourse analysis reveals the methods through which cultural colonialism was implemented and maintained. Second, literary analysis reveals the conceptual structures that support musical colonialism, which empirical observation cannot detect. Third, focusing on textual analysis acknowledges that decolonisation is fundamentally a discursive effort inside ecclesiastical institutions. The investigation examines textual materials from the establishment of Scottish Presbyterian missions in Southern Africa in the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary UPCSA decolonial initiatives. Primary source materials include missionary correspondence and reports from the archives of the Free Church of Scotland, ecclesiastical publications from Presbyterian missionary presses in Edinburgh, liturgical resources ranging from colonial-era hymnals to contemporary UPCSA liturgical materials, and theological writings that examine the relationship between the Reformed tradition and African cultural expression.

Analysis of Colonial Ecclesiastical Texts

Missionary Reports and Musical Hierarchy

Nineteenth-century missionary reports demonstrate sophisticated literary techniques for establishing and maintaining European musical dominance in African contexts (Dussel 995). The 1852 Report from the Lovedale Mission provides conclusive evidence, characterising indigenous rhythmic patterns as disturbances to be rectified (Free Church of Scotland 1881; Lovedale Mission 1852). This report employs several advanced rhetorical strategies to establish musical hierarchy. The categorisation of African musical elements as intrusions into European forms presupposes the intrinsic validity of European musical practices while portraying African contributions as disruptive violations. The theological disparity between African and European music creates a hierarchical framework that associates European forms with spiritual validation and African forms with religious deficiency (Smith 1999). As Ela (1988) argues, this creates alienation and a “credibility crisis” for Christianity in Africa—many see it as foreign, elitist, or complicit in oppression. It is in this hierarchical framework that one could argue that even though missions brought education, church music, and literacy, they also brought cultural disruption to Africans as a consequence (Elphick and Davenport 1997).

Liturgical Instructions and Cultural Control

The liturgical instruction manuals designed for African mission contexts illustrate the methods of colonial domination through precise regulation of worship rituals (Free Church of Scotland 1856; *Sacred Song for African Churches* 1895). The 1875 *Manual of Divine Service for Native Congregations*, issued by the Free Church of Scotland, outlines precise stipulations for morning worship, mandating unison singing accompanied solely by a harmonium, while explicitly forbidding the use of drums,

rattles, and indigenous instruments (Free Church of Scotland 1875). This instructional text demonstrates how liturgical regulation functioned as a means of cultural control by specifying acceptable musical instruments, forbidding physical activity, and imposing European musical traditions emblematic of Scottish Presbyterian worship, particularly the Free Church tradition of regulated psalmody.

Hymnographic Texts and Epistemological Control

The prefaces and introductory sections of Scottish Presbyterian hymnbooks designed for African audiences employ sophisticated strategies to exert epistemic control through musical instruction. The 1890 preface to *Hymns for Native Congregations* indicates that songs were selected to provide African converts with access to Christian musical expression without circumventing theological uncertainty (United Presbyterian Church 1890). This introductory piece clarifies some essential assumptions about the relationship between musical practice and religious understanding. European hymns are depicted as providing access to authentic Christian tradition, implying that African musical genres are inadequate for this purpose.

Contemporary Textual Decolonisation in UPCSA Materials

Liturgical Revision and Decolonial Aspiration

Current UPCSA liturgical materials demonstrate ongoing tensions between traditional colonial textual frameworks and emerging decolonial theological ideas. The 2010 *UPCSA Service Book Supplement* recognises the diversity of musical expression as a divine endowment, affirming that African musical traditions embody essential theological truths that enrich rather than detract from Reformed heritage (UPCSA 2010). This statement marks a notable shift from traditional colonial missionary rhetoric. The essay acknowledges African musical traditions as sources of theological insight rather than portraying them as theologically controversial. The paradigm transcends colonial dichotomies by suggesting that African and European traditions can complement rather than oppose one another. Nevertheless, contrapuntal research reveals enduring tensions within this revised liturgical framework. The *UPCSA Service Book Supplement* recognises the theoretical importance of African musical traditions but prioritises written transmission over oral ways, providing extensive notation for European hymns while offering limited guidance for incorporating indigenous musical elements.

Hymnographic Innovation and Cultural Synthesis

Contemporary UPCSA hymnographic materials demonstrate unique approaches to textual decolonisation by producing hybrid musical forms that integrate African and European themes into new synthetic frameworks (*Hymnal for African Missions* 1889). The 2015 publication *Lift Up Your Hearts: African Presbyterian Hymnal*, issued by UPCSA Publications, exemplifies these unique efforts. The editor's preface indicates that this collection aims to demonstrate the reciprocal illumination and enhancement of

African musical skills and Reformed theological tradition, thereby cultivating new pathways for authentic worship expression (UPCSA 2015). The hymnal features traditional Scottish Presbyterian hymns and African spiritual songs, but importantly, it incorporates hybrid compositions that aim to integrate African rhythmic patterns, harmonic structures, and literary techniques into established musical frameworks (*Revised Hymnal for African Missions* 1902). This signifies a notable advancement from previous colonial hymnals that completely disregarded indigenous musical expressions, progressing towards the acknowledgement of compositions such as *Incwadi Yamaculo amaXhosa* (Bantu Presbyterian Church of South Africa 1929), which safeguarded Xhosa Christian musical traditions through the collaboration of missionary and indigenous church authorities (UPCSA 2019).

Theological Discourse and Decolonial Hermeneutics

Contemporary UPCSA theological writing demonstrates significant efforts to develop decolonial hermeneutical frameworks that include African musical epistemologies within Reformed theological systems (UPCSA Theological Commission 2022). Vuyani Vellem's theological essay exemplifies decolonial theological discourse, arguing that the colonial suppression of African musical traditions constitutes a significant violation of theological integrity, thereby undermining the understanding of divine truth. Furthermore, it posits that African musical traditions embody theological truths related to social identity, spiritual transcendence, and divine connection that European forms cannot achieve (Vellem 2019, 45). This theological argument directly challenges colonial notions of the relationship between cultural authenticity and theological truth (De Gruchy 1991). Vellem argues that viewing African musical activities as detrimental to Reformed theology ideas is misguided, as their suppression limits theological understanding. For instance, the call-and-response pattern prevalent in African worship embodies a communal theological understanding that transcends the individualistic approach of European hymnody, reflecting Ubuntu principles of interconnectedness and collective spiritual experience (UPCSA Theological Commission 2021).

Three Approaches to Musical Decolonisation

Gradual Integration: Reformist Textual Strategies

An analysis of UPCSA resources reveals three distinct strategies for musical decolonisation. The initial strategy aims to gradually integrate African musical elements into traditional Reformed liturgical frameworks. The 2018 UPCSA Worship Guidelines exemplify this principle, indicating that congregations may incorporate appropriate African musical elements into established liturgical frameworks, ensuring these additions enhance rather than diminish the central proclamation of the Word (UPCSA 2018a). This language approach maintains colonial structural frameworks while permitting limited integration of African music, as in literature. The emphasis on appropriate materials reveals enduring biases concerning the theological questions posed by indigenous traditions (Achebe 1975).

Radical Transformation: Revolutionary Textual Approaches

A secondary approach seeks a more profound transformation of liturgical structures by thoroughly re-evaluating colonial concepts and methodologies. The 2020 theological statement "Towards Decolonised Worship" articulates a radical, transformative viewpoint, contending that the colonial imposition of European liturgical practices on African Christians represents a profound violation of theological integrity and human dignity, warranting systematic dismantling rather than incremental alteration (UPCSA 2020a). This literary style explicitly rejects gradualist methods in favour of systematic transformation. The article asserts that colonial liturgical frameworks are fundamentally incompatible with authentic African Christian expression and therefore require replacement rather than modification (UPCSA 2019).

Contextual Adaptation: Pragmatic Textual Solutions

A third approach emphasises contextual adaptation, acknowledging that different congregational contexts require unique strategies for managing the link between Reformed identity and African cultural expression (Presbyterian Church Building Committee 1874; UPCSA 2022a, 2022b). The 2021 *Contextual Worship Manual* outlines an adaptive methodology, asserting that each congregation must determine how to honour both Reformed theological principles and local cultural traditions, acknowledging that genuine worship emerges from the creative intersection of universal theological truths and specific cultural expressions (UPCSA 2020b, 2021). This contextual methodology acknowledges the complexities of decolonial transition while providing practical guidance for local adaptation.

Critical Analysis: Possibilities and Limitations

Achievements of Textual Decolonisation

The analysis highlights many significant achievements in UPCSA's decolonial efforts. Modern church writings demonstrate considerable progress in acknowledging and assessing colonial textual legacies that were previously neglected or unexamined. The explicit recognition that colonial suppression of African musical traditions detracted from, rather than enhanced, Christian worship indicates a significant epistemic shift. The rise of hybrid textual forms that aim to integrate African and European musical elements inside synthetic frameworks illustrates the creative capacity to transcend colonial dichotomies (UPCSA 2020c). The theological justification for musical decolonisation presented in UPCSA publications provides intellectual foundations for practical transformation.

Persistent Limitations and Contradictions

However, the analysis reveals significant deficiencies in the current UPCSA decolonial programmes. The enduring preference for written traditions over oral ones sustains colonial concepts of legitimate knowledge transmission, even in texts that explicitly advocate for decolonisation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). The institutional responsibility

to maintain Reformed theological identity imposes limitations that constrain the degree of epistemic advancement possible within ecclesiastical contexts. The focus on inclusion and integration, while suggesting progress beyond colonial exclusion, may inadvertently perpetuate subtle forms of cultural hierarchy by assuming that African traditions must affirm their theological validity within European frameworks rather than being recognised as autonomous sources of religious truth.

The Challenge of Authentic Transformation

The analysis highlights the fundamental challenge of achieving authentic decolonial transformation within institutional structures that rely on inherited colonial mechanisms for their legitimacy and identity. The UPCSA's commitment to maintaining its Reformed theological identity unavoidably constrains the scope of possible epistemic advancement. The textual evidence suggests that successful decolonisation may require a more radical reconfiguration of institutional structures than current church leadership is prepared to undertake. The principal challenges facing musical decolonisation within the UPCSA are neither practical nor liturgical, but rather deeply cognitive.

Implications for Church Historical Scholarship

Methodological Contributions

This study demonstrates the importance of literary analysis in the historical scholarship of churches that investigates decolonial tendencies inside religious institutions. The purely textual approach reveals the conceptual foundations that shape religious practice, avoiding the ethical challenges often associated with empirical research in postcolonial contexts. The contrapuntal reading methodology is particularly adept at revealing internal contradictions and resistance within ostensibly homogeneous colonial literature, which contemporary decolonial projects can utilise and further develop.

Theoretical Implications

The study demonstrates the efficient application of postcolonial literary theory to ecclesiastical historical analysis, revealing the operation of colonial discourse inside religious contexts and emphasising pathways for decolonial reform. This investigation advances decolonial theory by examining the operation of epistemic decolonisation within institutional structures that must balance transformative objectives with institutional stability.

Directions for Future Research

The investigation reveals several important opportunities for future historical research on churches centred on decolonial actions. A comparative analysis of decolonial activities among various Reformed denominations in Southern Africa may clarify how distinct institutional contexts affect prospects for cultural transformation. Secondly, an examination of the interplay between decolonial musical initiatives inside the UPCSA

and wider cultural movements in South Africa may clarify the relationship between ecclesiastical and secular decolonial practices.

Conclusion

This literary analysis demonstrates that textual examination provides critical insights into the historical dynamics of musical colonialism and contemporary efforts in decolonial transformation within the UPCSA. The analysis reveals the functioning of colonial authority through complex discursive methods present in missionary reports, liturgical instructions, and hymnographic texts that systematically marginalised African musical expertise while establishing European alternatives as theologically normative. This study employs a contrapuntal reading methodology to clarify the interplay between colonial and indigenous musical knowledge systems in contemporary UPCSA texts, emphasising the lasting influence of colonial frameworks and the possibility for decolonial reform. The analysis outlines three distinct approaches to musical decolonisation within ecclesiastical contexts: gradual integration, radical transformation, and contextual adaptation, each representing different strategies for addressing the complex interplay between Reformed theological identity and African cultural expression. The investigation enriches ecclesiastical historical knowledge by demonstrating how colonial authority operated through literary channels that continue to influence contemporary church discourse. The findings suggest that understanding decolonial transformation requires attention to both the practical changes in worship practices and the underlying discursive frameworks that influence and constrain those activities.

The analysis reveals that the principal obstacles to musical decolonisation within the UPCSA are primarily epistemological, rather than merely practical or liturgical. The creation of authentically decolonised worship practices requires a comprehensive reformation of the epistemological frameworks that delineate valid theological understanding, appropriate cultural expression, and authentic Christian identity. The textual evidence suggests that while contemporary UPCSA materials demonstrate significant progress in acknowledging colonial legacies and promoting African cultural expression, they have not yet developed comprehensive alternatives to the foundational epistemological frameworks that supported colonial cultural hierarchy. This suggests that the primary objective of decolonisation may lie not in practical liturgical reform but in a fundamental reconfiguration of theological methodology and institutional identity. Future research should continue to explore the textual dimensions of decolonial transition, while acknowledging the inherent limitations and conflicts associated with literary approaches for cultural transformation. The creation of genuinely decolonised ecclesiastical structures remains a considerable challenge, requiring ongoing scholarly attention to the complex interactions between textual representation, institutional authority, and cultural authenticity in postcolonial religious contexts. The quest for epistemic decolonisation through musical reclamation in the UPCSA and other Southern African churches represents a significant historical progress and an ongoing

problem that requires sustained theological, practical, and academic engagement for future generations.

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