Article

Prophetic Witness in a Divided Land: Reincarnating Simon Maimela's Theological Voice in South Africa

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that examined the theological contributions of Simon Maimela (1944–), highlighting his prophetic witness against apartheid, inequality and ecclesial complicity. Situated within liberation theology, Maimela's work was explored as a form of resistance theology affirming the dignity, agency and spiritual integrity of oppressed Black South Africans. Using a liberation theology as a theoretical framework, the study analysed the intersection of theology, social context and political praxis in Maimela's thought, particularly his emphasis on humanisation, divine justice and contextualisation. Central to his theology is a critique of Western paradigms and a call for an African-centred, praxis-oriented approach. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative, hermeneutical approach, drawing on Maimela's writings, sermons and public addresses, supported by historical-critical analysis and secondary literature. While Maimela's bold contextualisation, critique of injustice and synthesis of African and Christian thought are considered to be his strengths, his relatively limited published output and occasional rhetorical style have led to his underrepresentation in global theological discourse. The present study utilised Creswell and Poth's qualitative research design as a methodological approach.

Keywords: African theology; apartheid; Black theology; the Church and justice; contextual theology; liberation theology; prophetic witness; Simon Maimela; South Africa

Introduction

Three decades after South Africa transitioned to democracy, the country remains marked by deep socio-economic and racial inequalities (Gumbi and Kumwenda-

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Mtambo 2024). While the dismantling of apartheid ushered in political liberation, its structural legacies, manifesting in persistent poverty, racialised economic disparities, land dispossession and systemic corruption, continue to shape everyday life for the majority (Southall 2022; Terreblanche 2014). These unresolved injustices signal not only political and economic failure but also a theological crisis. For Dandala (2022), the current moral vacuum in public life calls for a renewed prophetic imagination that engages both the Church and society.

Historically, theology in South Africa was not silent in the face of injustice. During the apartheid era, liberation theology emerged as a critical theological tradition, confronting oppression and articulating a vision of human dignity and justice. South African theologians, such as Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu and Simon Maimela, were instrumental in crafting a theology that was not merely academic but radically incarnational, rooted in the lived experiences of Black South Africans (Boesak 2015; Maimela 1987). Maimela advanced a theological vision that challenged the racialised norms of White theology and emphasised a liberative reading of the gospel. His insistence on theology as a public, contextual and justice-driven enterprise was part of a broader theological resistance movement that refused to separate faith from politics. However, this once vibrant tradition of prophetic witness has significantly diminished in the post-apartheid context.

Maluleke (2011) critiques the "domestication" of public theology, noting that the Church's voice has become increasingly bureaucratic and morally ambiguous. The "domestication" of public theology is evident where churches prioritise institutional survival, political neutrality and state patronage over prophetic critique (Maluleke 2011). In South Africa, many mainline and Pentecostal churches remained largely silent during major state capture scandals, thereby normalising corruption and weakening moral accountability (Boesak 2019). Similarly, limited ecclesial response to the Marikana massacre of 2012 reflected a reluctance to confront corporate exploitation and state violence against workers (Vellem 2015). Such silence illustrates how segments of the modern Church have become complicit in injustice through accommodation, disengagement and selective moral concern. In addition, Kumalo (2014) laments the ecclesial retreat into institutional survivalist and theological abstraction, which has left the Church largely disconnected from grassroots struggles. While public theology continues to be discussed in academic spaces, it is often detached from the radical urgency that defined its earlier forms. In this context of widening inequality and social fragmentation, the present study argued for retrieving and re-engaging Maimela's theological voice. However, this is not a nostalgic return. Scholars, such as Vellem (2010) and Mashau and Nwosu (2020), have warned that retrieving liberation theology must be coupled with critical recontextualisation.

Theologies of the past must speak meaningfully to present crises, including those that Maimela himself did not directly address, such as gender-based violence, ecological degradation and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning

(LGBTQ+) exclusion. Ecological degradation in Africa is closely linked to exploitative development models, weak environmental governance and climate vulnerability, which disproportionately affect poor communities (Shiva 2016; UNEP 2021). From a theological and ethical perspective, this undermines human dignity and violates principles of stewardship and justice (Conradie 2013). Similarly, LGBTQ+ exclusion remains widespread in many African societies due to cultural, religious and legal stigmatisation, resulting in social marginalisation and limited access to rights (Epprecht 2013). Such exclusion contradicts human rights frameworks and inclusive theological ethics that affirm the worth of all persons (Nicolson 2019). Together, environmental injustice and sexual minority exclusion reflect broader structural inequalities that challenge transformative and prophetic praxis.

Therefore, the present study adopted liberation theology as its theoretical framework, not as a fixed ideology, but as a dynamic, praxis-oriented approach that emphasises the preferential option for the poor, contextual theology and prophetic witness (Cone 1970; Gutiérrez 1973). It understands theology as a form of critical engagement with unjust systems, where faith is lived through solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised. In doing so, the study critically interacted with Maimela's theological corpus to ask: What does a liberative theology look like today in a post-apartheid South Africa still haunted by coloniality?

A qualitative research methodology was employed to investigate this question, using hermeneutical and historical-critical methods. The hermeneutical approach allowed for a contextual reading of Maimela's texts, subsequently attending to meaning, voice and interpretive frameworks, while the historical-critical method situates his work within the socio-political and ecclesial structures that shaped it (Palmer 1969; Thiselton 2009). This dual approach enabled a dialogical reading: Maimela was not treated as a static authority, but as a theological conversation partner whose insights invite both affirmation and critical expansion.

Problem Statement

Although South Africa achieved formal political liberation in 1994, the structural injustices of apartheid persist today albeit in new forms. Income inequality in the country remains among the highest in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 0.63, while approximately 35% of South Africans live below the national poverty line (StatsSA 2022; World Bank 2023). Unemployment disproportionately affects Black South Africans, with youth unemployment reaching 66% in some regions (ILO 2022), and access to quality education, healthcare and housing remains deeply unequal along racial lines. These socio-economic disparities are compounded by systemic corruption and a pervasive lack of ethical leadership within public institutions, undermining democratic consolidation (Alexander 2013a; 2013b; Piketty et al. 2021).

In response to these crises, much of the post-apartheid Church and theological academy appears to have retreated from public engagement, and the prophetic theological voice

has become increasingly muted (Balcomb 2013a; 2013b). Scholars, such as Landman (2010), Mashabela (2022), Molobi (2010), Masoga and Mathye (2010) and Van Wyngaard (2017), have recognised Maimela's contribution to liberation theology, grounded in the lived experiences of the oppressed. However, their engagements remain limited in scope and influence within contemporary theological discourse. Consequently, a pressing social and theological problem persists, namely: the marginalisation of liberationist, prophetic theology in the face of enduring socio-political injustice. As Van Wyngaard (2017) warns, the decline of public theology risks rendering theological institutions complicit in sustaining unjust structures, while Mashabela (2022) emphasises the urgent need to reclaim Maimela's vision as a counter-narrative to ecclesial apathy and societal inequality.

Research Questions

The study focused on the following four research questions:

1. How did Simon Maimela articulate prophetic witness in response to injustice and oppression in apartheid South Africa?
2. In what ways did Maimela's theology integrate faith, social context and political engagement?
3. How relevant is Maimela's prophetic and humanising theology in addressing contemporary divisions in South Africa?
4. How can Maimela's theological voice be reinterpreted and reactivated for present-day public and ecclesial discourse?

Theoretical Framework: Liberation Theology

The present study was grounded in liberation theology, which is a contextual and praxis-oriented theological movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to systemic injustice. In Latin America, Gutiérrez (1973, 13) advanced the "preferential option for the poor", arguing that theology must begin with the lived experiences of the marginalised. In the United States (US), Cone (1970) developed Black liberation theology, asserting that God's solidarity with the oppressed must shape Christian theology. Cone's work significantly influenced Maimela and Boesak, who localised liberation theology within the struggle against apartheid. In South Africa, liberation theology became a resistance theology rooted in racial oppression and colonial legacies (Villa-Vicencio and De Gruchy 1985). Phiri and Nadar (2010) emphasise the importance of contextualisation, praxis and transformation within this theological tradition. Maimela (1985; 1991) highlights the need to re-Africanise theology, critiquing Western theological categories and calling for a liberative gospel rooted in dignity, agency and justice. Thus, the study drew on liberation theology as a historical model and a living framework for theological resistance and social transformation.

Methodological Approach

The study employed a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring complex theological, historical and socio-political realities that resist quantification (Creswell and Poth 2018). It focused on Maimela's theological voice in post-apartheid South Africa, aiming to uncover embedded themes of justice, liberation and identity within his writings. A qualitative approach allows for rich, contextual interpretation, attending to language, ideology and historical experience (Swinton and Mowat 2006). The study adopted a hermeneutical methodology, particularly African contextual hermeneutics, which emphasises interpreting texts through the lens of African cultural, historical and political realities (Palmer 1969; Ukpong 1995). This approach allowed for a dialogical reading of Maimela's work, relating past theological insights to present-day challenges. In addition, a historical-critical method was used to situate Maimela's theology within its apartheid-era context, illuminating its engagement with Black Consciousness and critique of White-dominated theology (Thiselton 2009). This enabled a nuanced understanding of liberation theology as both resistance and constructive vision. Primary sources included Maimela's published works (books, articles, sermons and speeches), while secondary sources provided scholarly analysis of his theology and its relevance to post-apartheid crises. All the materials were assessed for contextual and scholarly credibility. Data analysis was conducted through thematic and comparative analysis, thereby identifying liberationist themes such as justice, dignity, prophetic witness and ecclesial complicity. This process recontextualised Maimela's voice as a model for contemporary prophetic theology.

Literature Review

Maimela remains an enduring figure in South African theological discourse, particularly for his pioneering role in articulating a theology of liberation that centres African identity, human dignity and socio-political transformation. Born on 14 July 1944 during the intensification of apartheid, Maimela's theological intervention emerged at a critical historical juncture. His academic trajectory, marked by studies at Harvard University in the US and the University of South Africa (UNISA), where he later became the first Black professor of Systematic theology, signified a personal and communal breakthrough in challenging Eurocentric epistemic dominance in theological education (Kgatla 2020). Maimela's theological project was unapologetically liberationist, grounded in the lived realities of the oppressed and explicitly anti-colonial in its epistemological orientation. Central to his thinking was the belief in the indivisibility of human liberation: the spiritual, political and economic aspects of life were deeply intertwined. As Maimela (1987) asserted in *Proclaim Freedom to My People*, authentic theology must confront not only sin in its spiritual form but also its structural manifestations in racism, poverty and systemic injustice. His emphasis on African humanism and Black identity, as both theological and political categories, was a direct rebuttal to Euro-American theological frameworks that often spiritualised suffering and ignored the agency of African people (Vellem 2019). Maimela was not merely a theologian of resistance but one who sought to re-imagine the very grammar of

theology. His engagement with African traditional religions, communalism and indigenous cosmologies constituted an epistemic shift seeking to decolonise theology from within (Kgatla 2020).

However, despite his significant contributions, Maimela's legacy remains underexplored in contemporary scholarship. The marginalisation of his thought in post-apartheid theological discourse reflects broader trends of erasure and epistemic neglect, particularly toward early Black and liberationist voices (Tshaka and Makofane 2022; Vellem 2019). Thus, the present study sought to address this lacuna by revisiting Maimela's work in light of the theological and ethical imperatives of post-apartheid South Africa. Historically, the concept of prophetic theology has played a pivotal role in South Africa's theological landscape, particularly during the anti-apartheid struggle. Institutions, such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), and radical documents, like the Kairos Document (1985), positioned the Church as a moral and political interlocutor, willing to speak truth to power and unmask the complicity of religious institutions in systemic oppression (Naidoo 2019). The prophetic tradition, as embodied in the work of Maimela and others, was not merely rhetorical but deeply praxis-oriented, focused on transforming society through theological conviction and grassroots activism. In the post-apartheid context, however, the terrain has shifted. While formal political liberation has been achieved, the promises of economic justice, social equity and land restitution remain largely unrealised. Once a bastion of resistance, the Church today faces accusations of retreating into privatised spirituality and institutional conservatism (Mashau and Nwosu 2020).

This criticism raises the urgent question: Can prophetic theology be re-imagined for a democratic yet deeply unequal society? Public theology has emerged as one response to this challenge, seeking to engage the public sphere, influence policy and shape moral discourse. However, critics have noted that public theology sometimes lacks the radical edge of earlier prophetic traditions and may risk co-optation by institutional interests (De Villiers 2018; Pillay 2020). Scholars, such as Tshaka and Makofane (2010, 532), argue for a return to a "decolonial prophetic theology" that is anticipatory rather than reactionary, rooted in African epistemologies yet critically engaged with contemporary challenges. For Tshaka and Makofane (2010), the task is not merely to update prophetic theology but to reconstruct it from a decolonial, intersectional and participatory standpoint. The complexities of post-apartheid South Africa, marked by persistent structural inequality, corruption, xenophobia, gender-based violence and ecological degradation, demand a theology that is both contextually grounded and epistemologically bold. Other scholars, including Boesak (2023), LenkaBula (2008) and Maluleke (2021), have called for a reinvigorated theological discourse that refuses to sanitise struggle or spiritualise injustice. Maluleke (2021), for instance, critiques the professionalisation of theology and calls on theologians to "get their hands dirty" by immersing themselves in the lived realities of the poor and marginalised. His concern echoes Maimela's own emphasis on theology as a site of political responsibility and ethical urgency. Boesak (2023), a contemporary of Maimela, continues to advance a

globalised liberation theology that speaks to the multiple empires of today's world, including neoliberal capitalism, environmental degradation and neo-colonialism. His insistence on the global relevance of South African prophetic theology signals the need for a simultaneously local and transnational theology. LenkaBula (2008), in turn, introduces a robust eco-theological and gendered perspective, arguing that theology must challenge extractive economic systems while drawing on African cosmologies that honour land, community and interdependence. These contemporary voices collectively stress that theological nostalgia or institutional complacency cannot address the unfinished project of liberation in South Africa. Instead, they call for a theology of engagement that is critical, contextual and committed to justice. For Dandala (2022), what is needed is a theology of wholeness, one that integrates liberation with healing, prophetic truth-telling with reconciliation and local struggle with global solidarity.

This emerging vision expands the scope of liberation theology beyond its classical binaries of oppressor/oppressed, incorporating intersectional concerns such as gender, sexuality, disability, migration and ecological sustainability (Chimhanda 2018; Dandala 2022). At the same time, liberation theology's relevance has been questioned by those who see it as historically situated, overly ideological, or insufficiently pluralistic for the contemporary context (Pillay 2020). Critics argue that it sometimes reproduces binary thinking or fails to account for the complexities of identity and power in a rapidly changing society. However, such critiques have also catalysed renewal, prompting theologians to engage liberation as an evolving, rather than static, paradigm. This includes engaging indigenous spiritualities, feminist and queer theologies and African decolonial thought, not as add-ons but as intrinsic to any theology committed to justice. In this context, revisiting Maimela's theological legacy is not an exercise in nostalgia but a critical task of reclamation and re-imagination. Maimela's holistic liberation theology, with its commitment to African identity, communal ethics and political transformation, offers invaluable resources for constructing a theology capable of addressing today's intersecting crises. His insistence that theology must confront injustice with critique and creative alternatives resonates profoundly in a time marked by disillusionment with both the Church and state.

Analysis and Findings

Maimela's theological contributions are marked by his deep commitment to liberation, Black identity and the public role of the Church, thereby offering a rich and challenging framework that remains profoundly relevant today. His work consistently bridges the gap between faith and socio-political responsibility, grounding Christian theology in the lived realities of the oppressed. From his earliest writings, Maimela (1980) raised concerns about the institutional Church's structure and spiritual relevance. He critiqued clericalism and called for leadership rooted in justice, service and the real needs of marginalised communities. This early emphasis on participatory ministry laid the foundation for his ongoing advocacy for prophetic leadership. He further developed this line of thought by critiquing rigid and hierarchical models of ministry within Lutheran

traditions (Maimela 1982), instead drawing from New Testament patterns of Spirit-led, dynamic service. For Maimela, empowering the laity was not optional; it was a theological necessity in the pursuit of justice. By the mid-1980s, Maimela's engagement with Black Consciousness and Black theology had become more pronounced. He boldly affirmed Black humanity and dignity and argued that Black Power was not about revenge but self-affirmation in the face of historical dehumanisation (Maimela 1984). His alignment with the movement underscored his insistence that theology must begin with the liberation of the oppressed, both spiritually and psychologically. Maimela's (1987) vision extended beyond critique to construction. He emphasised a theology of public responsibility, sharply critiquing the Church's silence in the face of apartheid and economic injustice (Maimela 1987). For him, the Church must be a vocal and active participant in dismantling oppressive systems. He aligned himself with liberation theologians globally, asserting that divine justice is not neutral – God sides with the oppressed, thus so must theology (Maimela 1987).

Throughout his work, Maimela unmasked the theological underpinnings of racism. He challenged how Western theology presented a dehumanised image of the human being based on White, Eurocentric assumptions (Maimela 1981). In response, he called for an African anthropology that affirms Black people's full humanity and dignity. He further argued that salvation is not merely a future, spiritual hope but a present, historical reality that restores agency to those dehumanised by oppression (Maimela 1982). In addressing the identity and mission of the Black Church, Maimela (1988) recognised a theological crossroads. He urged churches to reject inherited passivity and adopt liberationist paradigms capable of confronting systemic injustice. His vision of salvation (Maimela 1990) was inseparable from liberation, as it meant deliverance from social, political and economic bondage, not just spiritual renewal. Maimela's attention to African cultural identity was also a critical component of his theology. He challenged missionary theology's dismissal of indigenous traditions, arguing for a respectful integration that values African knowledge without compromising Christian faith (Maimela 1991). In doing so, he helped to reframe African culture not as a barrier to the gospel but as a context through which it could be authentically expressed.

By the early 1990s, Maimela (1993) had sharpened his focus on re-imagining God through the lens of the oppressed. He rejected depictions of a distant, apolitical deity in favour of a liberating God who acts in history. For him, theology must reflect the lived experiences of those crying out for justice and healing. Returning to theological anthropology in his later years, Maimela (1997) reaffirmed that all humans are created in the image of God and possess inherent dignity. Any theology that denies this, especially regarding Black identity, is a distortion of the biblical message. Maimela (1989, 9) makes it clear: "The divine preferential option for the poor and the oppressed runs through the entire Bible." He further states that "God, in Jesus … chose to take on the nature of a slave … so as to give the oppressed Blacks new life and hope" Maimela (1989, 9). For him, liberation and salvation were intertwined; theology must reflect God's active presence in history, siding with the marginalised and calling the Church

into bold, public witness. Even African anthropology, for Maimela (1991), with its emphasis on communitarianism and holistic living, offered insights for theology. He noted that living outside communal structures exposes individuals to spiritual and social disintegration. Thus, theology honing African worldviews can be a source of resilience and restoration. In his reflections on Black Consciousness, Maimela (1984) affirmed that the rise of Black Power created a new theological climate in South Africa. Black theology, he wrote, was birthed by Black Christians themselves, an interpretation of their suffering through the lens of a God whose justice demands liberation. Maimela (1986) argues that the Church cannot claim neutrality in political matters. He writes that "the church and theologians cannot afford to stand above politics ... for to do so would be an abdication of their responsibility" to the very people God cares for. He rejects pietism and quietism, insisting instead on a church engaged in structural change, speaking truth to power and resisting injustice with words and action. In sum, Maimela's theological project calls for nothing less than a radical reorientation of Christian thought and practice: from abstract doctrines to lived liberation. His work remains a powerful invitation for the Church to recover its prophetic voice and stand, unambiguously, on the side of the oppressed.

A Critique of Simon Maimela's Theological Approaches

Maimela's theology is widely celebrated for its bold articulation of liberation, rootedness in African identity and unflinching commitment to justice. However, like any theological framework, it is not without limitations. This section offers a critical engagement with his theological contributions, identifying both strengths and areas requiring further development, especially in light of contemporary challenges.

Strengths of Simon Maimela's Theology

Before turning to its limitations, it is essential to acknowledge the innovative, bold and contextually rooted character of Maimela's theological contribution. His work remains one of the most influential expressions of South African Black Theology, particularly for its commitment to justice, liberation and African dignity. Among the enduring strengths of Maimela's theology are his grounding in Black lived experience, bold prophetic ecclesiology, public theological engagement, affirmation of African identity and a clear ethical and justice-oriented framework. However, two features stand out as particularly foundational, namely: radical contextualisation and the reclaiming of African identity. Maimela's theology is firmly anchored in the lived realities of Black South Africans under apartheid. He insisted that theology must begin not with abstract dogma or Western categories but with the concrete historical and social experience of the oppressed. In his words, "theology must begin with the experience of oppression and move toward a liberating praxis" (Maimela 1991, 12). His contextual method challenged the theological neutrality that often disguised complicity with systemic injustice. As Phiri and Nadar (2010) observe, Maimela's work embodied the core liberationist commitment to praxis – the dynamic interaction of reflection and action within a specific socio-political context. By rooting theology in context, Maimela

ensured that it remained ethically responsible, socially engaged and accessible to ordinary people beyond the academy. His work exemplified what West (2016) terms "public biblical theology", where scripture and theology become tools of social transformation. Moreover, Maimela's radical contextualisation placed him within a global liberationist tradition, echoing thinkers such as Gutiérrez (1973) and Cone (1970), while developing a distinctly African theological voice. However. Bentley (2012) argues that Maimela's theology resisted the temptation of theological abstraction by focusing on the everyday struggles of Black communities.

A second major strength of Maimela's theology is its unapologetic affirmation of African identity and dignity. In his works, such as "Man in 'White' Theology" (1981) and "Towards a Theology of Humanisation" (1982), Maimela exposed the racial and cultural biases inherent in Western theological constructions of the human being. He argued that White theology rendered Black people invisible, denying their humanity and agency. In contrast, he asserted a theological anthropology that affirmed Black personhood as imago Dei, made in the image of God. This emphasis on humanisation became a theological act of resistance. Maimela's (1984, 42) efforts to reclaim African identity were not merely cultural but deeply theological: "Black Theology is not about revenge or hatred. It is about enabling Black people to affirm their own humanity in the face of centuries of denial." In this way, Maimela contributed significantly to the decolonisation of theology, challenging both White supremacy and theological paternalism.

According to Mashabela (2022), Maimela's theology was part of a broader Black Consciousness project that sought to empower Black people theologically and psychologically. His work helped to reframe African spirituality as a legitimate source of theological reflection, resisting the long-standing binary between "Christian" and "African" worldviews. Maimela's theology also excelled in its public orientation. He did not regard theology as an academic discipline isolated from society but rather as a tool for public ethics and political accountability. In *Proclaim to My People* (1987), he critiques the Church's silence in the face of oppression, calling for a theology that confronts public injustices such as racism, poverty and political corruption. According to Van Wyngaard (2017), Maimela's voice pushed the boundaries of ecclesiology, demanding that the Church reclaim its prophetic role in society. By placing theology in the public square, Maimela anticipated contemporary debates on public theology in South Africa, where theologians such as Vellem and Maluleke would later draw from his legacy to argue that faith must speak truth to power.

Limitations in Gender Analysis and Intersectionality

While Maimela's theology remains a landmark contribution to liberationist thought in South Africa, it is not without its limitations, particularly in light of emerging theological paradigms. Among these are its limited engagement with gender and intersectionality; an absence of ecological consciousness; the idealisation of the Church; and a tendency toward binary socio-political categories that can oversimplify complex

realities. A central critique concerns Maimela's underdeveloped gender analysis. Although he powerfully addresses issues of race and class, his theology does not sufficiently engage with patriarchal structures within the Church or society. His writings largely reflect an androcentric theological discourse that overlooks the specific oppressions faced by Black women, LGBTQ+ persons and people living with disabilities. As Oduyoye (2001) observes, any liberation theology that does not take the experiences of African women seriously is incomplete. Likewise, LenkaBula (2008) calls for a justice-centred theology that affirms bodily integrity, reproductive agency and gender dignity. Nadar and Jodamus (2019) add that the fight against oppression must also include sexual ethics and gender justice within the very institutions that claim to advocate for liberation. Although Maimela's (1982) theological anthropology affirms the general dignity of human beings, it lacks the gendered specificity needed to interrogate how oppression is differently distributed within Black communities themselves. Womanist and African feminist theologians have consistently shown that race and class cannot be analysed in isolation from gender, sexuality and embodiment (Kanyoro 2002; Russell 2006). The absence of such intersectional analysis in Maimela's work limits its applicability to the multidimensional realities of oppression in today's South Africa.

Another notable limitation is the absence of ecological theology in Maimela's framework. While his focus on political liberation during apartheid was urgent and contextually appropriate, today's theological discourse must reckon with the ecological crisis, especially in Africa, where climate change disproportionately affects poor and rural communities. In their individual studies, Dube (2012) and Grey (2003) argue that theologies of liberation must now include the earth as a subject of justice. Maimela's theology, while socially incisive, remains anthropocentric and thus under-equipped to address climate-related displacement, resource exploitation and environmental degradation – urgent justice issues in today's world. Maimela's prophetic ecclesiology is undoubtedly one of his strengths. However, some scholars caution that he may have overestimated the liberative potential of the institutional Church. His writings often assume a level of moral clarity and unity in the Church that is not always borne out in practice. In post-apartheid South Africa, churches have been criticised for their complicity in neoliberal politics, internal factionalism and failure to challenge systemic corruption (West 2013). Vellem (2010) argues for a more critical ecclesiology that does not romanticise the Church but rather calls it to repentance and structural reform. Maimela's framework would benefit from deeper engagement with such ecclesial self-critique. Furthermore, Maimela's strong binary framing (oppressor vs. oppressed), while effective during apartheid, may now risk flattening the complexities of post-apartheid power dynamics. Today, power is not only held by historically dominant groups but is also negotiated within marginalised communities themselves. Issues, such as intra-Black class division, internalised oppression and the complicity of previously oppressed groups in maintaining unjust systems, require a more nuanced analytical framework. Germond and De Gruchy (1997) suggest that liberation theology must evolve to engage with fluid, intersecting structures of power rather than rigid binaries.

Meanwhile, Seekings and Nattrass (2005) argue that racial and class inequalities entrenched under apartheid persist into the democratic era, with apartheid's legacy continuing to shape labour markets and income distribution despite political transformation. Seekings and Nattrass' (2005) work highlights that the "rainbow nation" remains one of the most unequal societies globally. Another argument is raised by Mabasa (2019, 173–193). According to Mabasa, African females and other marginalised groups remain disproportionately disadvantaged in the post-apartheid era, pointing to the intersection of race and gender as persistent sources of inequality and social stratification. To conclude this section, the study looked at Mafeje's (1997) Marxist critique of colonial and apartheid structures. He insists that socio-economic inequalities in South Africa are rooted in systems of land dispossession and capitalist exploitation, arguing that post-apartheid reforms have insufficiently disrupted these entrenched inequities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study sought to reincarnate Simon Maimela's theological voice within contemporary South Africa through the lens of prophetic witness and liberation theology. Through a historical-critical analysis of his primary texts, the study identified the following key themes, namely: the inseparability of liberation and salvation; the affirmation of Black identity and human dignity; and the call for active ecclesial engagement in social and political transformation. These themes remain highly relevant in a post-apartheid society still marked by economic inequality, xenophobia, systemic corruption and gender-based injustice. Although political structures have changed, many underlying injustices persist, necessitating a renewed prophetic theology in both church and public life.

Contextualising Maimela's theology revealed both continuity and adaptation. His critique of apartheid finds resonance in contemporary challenges, such as state capture, racialised inequality and ecclesial disengagement. However, present realities demand a broader, intersectional approach, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, ecology and migration. Therefore, the study has reaffirmed that prophetic theology must remain grounded in lived experience and responsive to evolving forms of oppression. Maimela's work challenges theologians and churches to resist abstraction and to engage directly with ethical and political struggles. For churches, the findings call for the recovery of their prophetic vocation through public witness and structural solidarity with the marginalised. For theologians, Maimela's legacy affirms the importance of producing knowledge from the underside of history and advancing an unapologetically African, critical and liberative theology. Theological institutions are urged to decolonise their curricula and place African voices at the centre of theological formation. Public theology must also be translated into practice through community engagement, civic forums and grassroots initiatives. In a context marked by rising xenophobia and religious nationalism, Maimela's emphasis on inclusive human dignity provides a foundation for interfaith and ecumenical solidarity. Churches are therefore called to

foster collaboration across denominational and religious boundaries in pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

Thus, the study has acknowledged several limitations, including its primary reliance on published texts and the absence of empirical engagement with contemporary practitioners of Maimela's theology. Future research should incorporate oral histories, archival materials and field-based studies to deepen understanding of his ongoing influence. Maimela's theology is not merely a product of apartheid-era resistance but a living resource for contemporary liberation. Grounded in the dignity of the oppressed, the public responsibility of the Church and the radical demands of divine justice, his prophetic vision continues to challenge South Africa to pursue a more just, humane and inclusive society.

Further Reading and Research

It is recommended that contemporary theological discourse address issues that are not fully developed in Maimela's context. Scholars whose insights are helpful in this regard include, but are not limited to, Kgatle (2021), Pillay (2020), Van Klinken (2019) and Zuboff (2019), among others. The emerging challenges in the postcolonial African context require interdisciplinary tools and intersectional frameworks that move beyond traditional liberationist binaries. While Maimela provides a robust foundation, his theology must be reinterpreted and expanded to engage effectively with these new forms of social fragmentation and injustice.

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