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Liberation theology and African church hymnody: the case of Negro spirituality

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Dates:

Received: 6 November, 2024
Accepted: 6 August, 2025
Published: 20 October, 2025

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Competing interests:

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Liberation theology and African church hymnody: the case of Negro spirituality**ABSTRACT**

The African church is conversant with Western hymnody as a result of colonialism. Hardly could one discover a song of African origin in their worship. Some are merely translated forms of Western hymns into African indigenous languages without minding the miscommunication that arises among tonal languages. Many African worshippers are ignorant of hymnody of African origin; a hymnody that inculcates their reality and identity through tonal and pentatonic music, theology, beliefs, and culture, which can foster effective worship among them. The paper argues that there are problems and concepts associated with the African church which only a true African hymnody could address, such as injustice, marginalisation, discrimination, and spiritual warfare. All these problems are liberation-based. The ancient hymnody of African origin is the Negro spiritual, which expressed the travails of African slaves transported to the New World during the period of slavery. It is a reflection of African reality. As Western hymnody is functional in Western churches to reflect and inculcate their values and culture, so the hymnody of African origin can portray and inculcate biblical culture through the contextualisation of liturgy in their gatherings. Upon this the paper is written. The research methodology is descriptive, consulting various literature, books, and journals to reveal what different authors have written about the issues in order to know their views and perspectives, which serve as leverage for a new contribution to the field of knowledge. The paper recommends that hymns of African origin be featured in African church worship to aid contextualisation and indigenisation of liturgy.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, African church hymnody, Negro spirituality, African church

A. INTRODUCTION

The African church is a microcosm of Western church as a result of evangelism by the Western mission. Her pattern of worship follows that of the western culture such as music as in instrumentation, the tonality, dance, dressing, and even cultural values. African musical instruments are devilish in Western perspective and are forbidden in worship services. Anything "black" signify darkness because of this there is "White Jesus" despite the fact that Jesus Christ was of African origin.

The Western theology favoured slavery in which Christianity in Marxism was seen as state apparatus to control the citizenry by the state actors as in "Slaves, obey your master!" in the bible. The Western dressing was recommended in worship leadership at the expense of indigenous dressing. Darwinism, a theory that is dehumanizing to Africans was a dominating philosophy in the Western church hymnody which discriminates the black from their White counterpart such as the hymn, "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus" (As in the portion of the music which says, "Precious is the flow that makes me WHITE as snow"). The black was believed to be of the descent of the Apes and were treated as animal. All these discrimination lasted for centuries before the emancipation of the slaves through the abolition act.

A hymnody of African origin is Negroes spiritual, which is the reflection of African slaves' calamity in the hand of the slave masters. It is a reflection of African culture as in musical style and instrumentation, theology and belief system. It is centred on the plantation experience in the hand of slave masters.

The major theme of the music is "liberation" from the travails such as marginalization, discrimination and injustice. It gave hope to the African slaves even in their calamity, as it was a mean of channelling out the emotions. It made the scripture meaningful to them in liking their travails to that of Israel in Egypt and with the life of Jesus Christ in birth, suffering, death and resurrection in which they were referred to as "Easter" people. Upon this centred Liberation theology, on which the African church hymnody is based with the Negroes spiritual as a case study.

How heart breaking would it be to see on a fateful day a foreigner come to buy the natives (land owners) with the collaboration of some of their relations and native leadership by force to be ferried to a foreign lands for hard labour as slaves? How painful would it be to see siblings sold to different slave masters without the hope of meeting again? How painful would it be to be deprived of ones' freedom? All the enigmatic questions are stemmed out of the African slavery experience before the emancipation was declared. They are the causes of liberation theology. Liberation theology is a derivative of African slavery experience; an experience that is unpalatable whose reminiscence is still lingering.

B. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Liberation: The word is derived from the root word, "liberate" which is verb. It means to free someone from feelings or conditions that makes their life unhappy or difficult; to free prisoner, a city, a country etc. So, "Liberation" is a process of freeing someone from any calamity (Longman, 2001). It is the deliverance of slaves from the slave masters as in the narrative of the Negroes in which the African slaves were set free from their yokes under the oppression of their slave masters that is the Europeans. It is an act of getting independence from the colonial master.

Theology: It is the knowledge about God which may be systematically or disorganized (Wayne, 1944:23). It is thinking about God through all natural evidences and revelations in the environment. It is the divine revelation through all sorts of theological arguments that may be appealing to man such as cosmological, ontological, Christological, retribution, orderliness of universe argument etc.

Bed-Rock: It is the basic ideas, and principles of a belief etc. (Longman 2001). Bed-rock is the solid foundation on which a philosophy for certain endeavour or belief is built; it is the anchor for shaping and structuring a composition. It is the main motive and objective of the musical composition; the direction of address or the beacon of a piece of musical work. It is the centrifugal force that holds or binds together a musical composition in the centre of attraction, and the score card for the evaluation of a piece of music validity and reliability.

Hymnody: The is derived from the root word, "Hymn" which is a song of praise to God; while the "Hymnody" the study about songs of praise to God (Longman 2001). It is the study of the origin of a musical composition; the historical background such as the author, the composer, the era and event or story in which the composition is derivative and evolutionary. It is the historical bases of the sacred vocal music which guides its performance in Christian liturgy.

Negroes-Spiritual: Negro is the old version of a word meaning a black person which is now offensive; negroes(plural); while "spiritual" is a religious song of the type sung originally by the black people of the United States of America (Longman 2001). It is the song of disinherited Africans shipped away from their

fathers land during the slave trade. It is a song of the slave that portrays African identity which originated from the sugar cane plantation to increase their productivity, channel out their emotions and invincible church organized by the slave as an alibi for their escape from their slave masters.

Church: The Church is the community of all true believers for all time (Wayne 1994: 853). It is the assembly of God's people bond by faith in Jesus Christ. They are the people called out of the world for the glory of God.

C. OVERVIEW OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation theology is theology that centred on the liberation of poor, oppressed, from the oppressor. It is based on the biblical view of a rich man and Jesus disposition to rich and the poor in the secular world. The theology is based on social justice to help the marginalized. The theological idea originated in the 70s by the Catholic Church in South America although predated by the Negroes clamour for emancipation led by the abolitionist. In 1980, Pope John Paul II emphasized helping the poor (www.u.tube.com).

The criticism against the idea even from the Roman Catholic faithful in the Europe is the secularization of Christianity at the expense of heavenly rewards; and seen as pollicisation of Christianity. The theology exists because of the plight of farm workers in the hand of their masters. It is the earthly liberation of the poor and political approach to Christianity to strengthen the relation of secular world which is to deliver the oppressed, and to help the marginalized (www.u.tube.com).

The theology was needed among the African Christians in the past century because of their oppression in slavery. During the period they were subjected to hardship in the hands of slave masters. A documentary, "Transatlantic Trade: Slave and Suffering" revealed that 12 million of Africans were sold to slavery while 2 million died on the journey. This began between 16c -19c with collaboration of almost thirty countries.

There was a prominent structure which is described as "Trianglatory"; that is European slave traders brought ship from the Europe to enslave the Africans; sold them to North America, and Caribbean with the help of natives (leadership and relations). It is recorded that Europeans were not the first originators of slavery; it was an act predating their advent by the natives. The Portuguese were the people that turned slave trade to a serious business in 15c; they would come to the West Africa to buy slaves through trade by barter. They gave whiskey, gunpowder, and weapons in exchange for the slaves. (www.u.tube.com).

There was a depot in Lagos and Senegal West Africa which was named as point-of-no-return; any slave who got to the place had no hope of returning back home. Portuguese were the first to export slaves to Spain followed by French and others. Elion Collins, the custodian in slave trade reservatory in Senegal said that slave trade would not be possible if not for the connivance of some natives, an excuse given by the Europeans who don't support African reparation fine demanded from the West. There was a Cape-Coast castle in Senegal which was rebuilt by the British in 19c. The castle was a church with a basement where slaves were kept. The slave trade was also supported by the half- cast of Portuguese-African descents. These people would come with their affluence to purchase slaves in Africa. (www.u.tube.com).

The slaves suffered a lot by being forced and sold as goods. It is even recorded that Africans were reduced to a mere goods. The slaves' suffered shackles in hands and legs. They were used in North America for sugar- canes product and man-power for the Caribbean in their industries. Slave were subjected to all forms of inhuman treatment such as raping of female among them, drilling and padlocking of their mouths so that they would not talk or eat from the sugar cane. (www.u.tube.com).

According to William (1990: np),

For almost a century black North Americans had little or no contact with American Christianity. From the landing of the first African at James town in 1619 until the society for the probation of the faith began its work of evangelizing the Slaves in 1701, black salvation remained outside the concern of North American Christians. By contrast, Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, the Caribbean, and South America less rigid social structure allowed contact with tribal groups and the mixture of Christianity and variety form of African religions. Among the Caribbeans, South America, and Maroon Slave population, distinctive cultural traits survived for centuries almost untouched. But when Christianity was introduced to the Slaves of North America due in part to high and relentless contact with their masters and in part to a desire to make Christianity the servant of the master's agenda, slaves enthusiastically embraced Christianity, in particular the protestant traditions and suppressed their ancient practices.

There was discrimination against the slaves. The white demeaning the black through the social Darwinist missionaries who referred the Africans "rude barbarians," dark benighted "pagans" and heathens. This is reflected in their missionary hymn, "From Green Land's Icy Mountain", "Over the Ocean Waves". Also, they did not see people as being equal before God. They were not allowed to sit on the same pew with white worshipers. At a point, they were driven to the gallery; even at that they were still seen as plagues.

Richard Allen, founding father bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal, a slave narrated his experience:

A number of us usually attended St. George church in Fourth Street and when the coloured people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood, and told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formally occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seat, the elder said, ' Let us pray ". We had not being long on our knees before I had considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustee - - - - - having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up his knees and saying, 'You must not kneel here,' Mr. Jones replied, ' Wait until prayer is over - - - - -;and I will get up and trouble you no more'. With that he beckoned one of the trustee- - - - - to come to his assistance - - - - - By the time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body and they were no more plagued with us in the church"(quoted in Williams 1990).

This shows that Christianity was not introduced to the African slaves out of love of Christ but for the selfish function they expected from them especially a way of taming them by teaching them obeisance to their masters from the scripture so that they would not run away and even be producing baby slaves in slavery.

The tribulation caused the African black worshippers to pull out of the church and form the First African Church. Formation of the black peoples' church was not the end of the tribulation; despite the formation of the church, the white counterparts still interfere with African church affairs. They said that Africans did not know how to worship God. Yet, they didn't want to worship with them or belong to the same association where they will be equal and be discussing together. So, they decided to organize a conference for African Methodist preachers, under the patronage of the white Methodist bishops, with the

hope of achieving their selfish end. The more the Africans were persecuted, the more they grew in worship. They referred to African church as "coloured brethren"(Longman 2001).

Another sect from Methodist Episcopal was originated to eradicate racial discrimination in the church. This sect was called, "The United Methodist church". Their aim was to have both Black and White worship together. After some time, some white in the church wrote their mother church, Methodist Episcopal that they could no more tolerate worshipping with Black worshippers.

So, their mother who herself was interested in racial segregation advised them to divide the church into jurisdiction through vote. At the end of the vote, Black were marginalized from the white by vote for separate jurisdiction for Black. They sang the song, "We Are Marching to Zion" while the Black delegates remained seated, and some were weeping. Just as the elders of Israel said, "To your tent Israel" (1Kg 12: 16); so was the reaction of the Black (Longman 2001).

There is need for liberation theology because of various act of injustice in the contemporary time such as gender inequality, tribal and religious marginalization, racial stratification between the rich and the poor in the rule of law, religious tolerance, social injustice, difference in wages and salaries of workers, and colour bar.

D. AFRICAN CHURCH

The African church is highly dedicated and fast growing church compared with the West. For example, in South Africa, 94% come for mass compared with American against challenges and oppression. It is believed that African church is doing so well and invariably the feature of the church. African church is surmised to be doing well in evangelism because of the attributes such as primacy of super natural unlike the West.

Nevertheless, they believe in Jesus Christ as the saviour of the world and efficacy of the Holy Spirit. The church has distinguished message. The African church hold fast the theology and moral orthodoxy not deviating from church teaching through acculturation of the gospel by not bending the church culture but shape the contextual culture to the scriptural culture. African church is committed to evangelizing the wider culture such as polygamy, a major cultural challenge. African church praises in public and criticizes in private the issues related to the church figures such as disagreement and vision in a constructive way. The African church encourages moral virtues even in the face of opposition and hostility (www.u.tube.com).

The perspective of the West towards this virtues is that the African church could do such exploit because they are poor, uneducated and seek divine intervention for economic reason. It is believed that African church priesthood is for economic reason so also is secularism.

E. AFRICAN- AMERICAN HYMNODY: THE NEGROES' SPIRITUAL

The African slaves didn't forget their culture in the foreign land. They paralleled their narrative with that of the Israelites with the exception of "Singing the songs of their God in a foreign land". Negroes' spiritual is otherwise named as black hymnody. This was formed during the slavery plantation hard labour in "invisible church" and when they were ostracized from the White Church. Some spiritual were formed during the camp-meeting. The songs are called song of Zion. The African slaves' songs reflect the beauty of African culture which is embedded in them. According to Augustus,

I can hardly express the pleasure it afford me to turn in that part of the gallery where they sit and see so many of them with their psalm or hymnbook, turning to the part then sung and assisting

their fellows, who are beginners, to find the place, and then all breaking out in torrent of sacred harmony, enough to bear away the whole congregation to heaven"(Williams 1990).

The songs are theologically sound because they portray raw theology of the African slaves which is "Liberation Theology" which came out of tribulation experience (although, it may not be systematically). The Negroes' songs speak on life and death, suffering and sorrow, love and judgement, grace and hope, justice and mercy. For example:

Song of hope and grace: Example of this is "I Will Overcome" The song was composed by C.A.T. The Negroes' knew that though they may be passing through a tough time victory would come. The song kept them alive in the face of persecution to the point that they even did not fear death in which death was seen as a means of liberation.

Suffering and sorrow: Example of this is "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child". It was not really a melancholy song but a song through which Negroes expressed and channelled out their negative emotion. It is believed that it had therapeutic effect on the slaves, even with crying because it is believed that bottled emotion is suicidal. It is a song of reflection on gracious act of God because it is believed that a person that is singing is not singing about the present experience but a reflection on the past which is even therapeutic.

Love and judgment: Example of this is "My Eyes Have Seen The Glory". It is called "Battle Hymn of Republic" written by Julia Ward Howell. The song talks victory over the enemies and God's redemptive power. It also shows God's love in faithfulness to his promises. The tune is an American camp-meeting tune (McClain 1990:45). They believed in the law of retribution in which they saw the hands of God in whatever they passed through and his divine vengeance for his people over their enemies as "Easter" people they trusted.

Negroes' spirituality is African in nature. It follows African rhymes, scale, spontaneous with call and response style with a dancing style called "A Shout". "Camp-meeting" was an important basis for the growth of what we are now known as spiritual. These songs whether sung by blacks or whites were essentially music of the country side.

The blacks brought special qualities to their spirituals, a background of field hollers and ecstatic character of their African musical heritage." He said further that the music tended to be of the call-and-response type, this common structure so common in African traditional music, allows great freedom, no books are needed, for the chorus is easy to pick up and the solo calls can be improvised on the spot.

However, all this was accomplished by hand-clapping and foot-stamping, creating a Christian protest music of distilled and concentrated ecstasy. Andrew made it known that their music is accompanied by a dance call, "A Shout ". It was referred to as sanctified dance against the criticism they had for the secular social dancing which was seen as sinful" (Wilson-Dickson 1992:194).

According to Bailey, the same spiritual was also the antecedent for evangelical and gospel hymns. He made it known that it was developed in the early decade of the 19c. It is evangelical in spirit but focused especially on winning souls through conversion. While its primary use was in revival, it was taken over by Sunday schools, Christian Associations and churches that in general were made up of less educated members to whom literary form and quality had little appeal compare with emotion(of Negroes Spiritual spontaneous presentation) (cf. Albert 1950:482).

F. IMPORTANCE OF NEGROES SPIRITUAL

Negro spiritual importance cannot be over emphasis. Stated below are some of the importance:

Transformation: It provides nourishment for the weary souls and folks who too frequently felt and we're "motherless " or "fatherless" or "childless". Metaphorically, there was always music in the air during the period for the healing of slavery wounds while the experience was even interpreted and seen through a positive perspective. It could serve as a therapy for people with mental health this day. It could be used as message to the church through choral rendition in Christian worship. It could be used as prelude, offertory even postlude especially in remembrance service to make the story vivid in the heart of the people and never pray for such experience again.

Emotional Release: It serves a therapeutic role in emotional expression which may be positive or negative for bottled emotion is suicidal. At running singing through the body, the affected parts are touched and healed. People that are suffering from bi-polar depression could find a remedy through it. As it is known in the doctrine of ethos, it could exert its power in influencing the mood of the depressed ones.

Symbolism: Negroes' spiritual is patterned after the biblical stoic experiences like that of Jesus Christ and His mother, Virgin Mary. The slaves saw their tribulation as the symbolism of that of Jesus Christ. As they imagined the suffering of the saviour, it created positive transformation in them. Example of this is "Were You There When They Crucified My God". Other is: "Mary Born a Baby". This gave the troubled mother who lost their children to slavery hope as Mary too had similar challenges with King Herod (Arthur 1992:24).

Reflecting on the historical background of the Negro spiritual could console people who are passing through a challenging situations. It would give them hope that God who changed the story of slaves to good could do likewise to them.

It serves as national identity: As it is known that culture is part of identity, Negroes' spiritual preserves and portrays the African slaves' identity, such as music (the rhythm and the scale).

Also, is the languages of the people. The songs were usually be a spontaneous music based on the narration of the slaves' harrowing experience or be a truncated fashion of western language revival slave masters' hymns; especially their music at encounter with Methodism of Charles Wesley. Likewise, Negro spiritual reflects the biblical culture. It is a full gospel on its own because it summarizes the whole scripture through its theme. It could instil the knowledge of the bible in the minds of the people being scriptural and theologically sound.

Negroes' spiritual has impact on the American camp-meeting music (also called "camp-meeting spirituals) with the legacy of spontaneous singing. During the age of great awakening and evangelical revival, Charles Wesley and his counterparts, black and whites worship together.

According to Hustad, it is possible that both cultures contributed to spontaneous singing in the brush arbour meetings and that black continued the tradition after the white moved to new forms of "composed" music (cf. Donald, 1993).

The similarity between camp-meeting songs and black spirituality is shown by Ellen Jane Lorenz Porter in her lecture "The Persistence of the Primitive in American Hymnology". She presented the fact that the song, "Where Are the Hebrew Children?" is found in both the North and the South and among the blacks.

Where, are the Hebrew children, (repeat).

Who were cast in the furnace of fire?

Safe now in the promise land.

(Ref.) By and by we'll go home to meet, (repeat twice)

Way over in the Promised Land.

2. Good Elijah, 3. Prophet Daniel, 4. Weeping Mary,
5. martyred Stephen, 6. Blessed Jesus, etc.

Many of the camp-meeting songs also became "secular" in a reversal of the traditional revivalist metamorphosis, secular to sacred. Few of the Negroes' spirituals are attached as appendices (Donald 1993).

G. LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS BED-ROCK OF AFRICAN CHURCH HYMNODY

The first African church is the African Methodist Episcopal Church, funded by Richard Allen. It was created in reaction to the negative and distasteful experience they had at St. George's Methodist Church where they experienced racial segregation and discrimination in the church. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) has the longest and most informative hymnological history among the Black Protestant denomination which were founded in North America.

An excellent compilation of a cross-section of the African- American Hymnody resulted in the Bicentennial Hymnal (1984). The founding date of the hymnal was calculated from the year 1887 when Richard Allen and his fellow worshipers withdrew from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, in protest against racial discrimination. The hymns passed through a series of revisions such as 1801, 1818, 1837, 1876, 1892, 1941, 1954 respectively.

Richard Allen compiled fifth-four classic and folk hymns titled "A Collection of Spiritual Songs and hymns, selected from various authors and made popular Eileen Southern in the early 1970s. Southern made an in-depth research on the hymnal and commended it for several reasons: First, it was an original compilation of Allen, instead of using the official Methodist hymnal, second, it was the first published black denominational hymnal. Third, it was the first published book to include "wondering chorus". The bishop used to endorse the hymn to buy because of competition with existing ones. Choirs began to develop rapidly throughout the period the 1837 hymnbook was in use. The choir were taken among the congregation which was first objected (McClain 1990).

Turner's book being the first hymnbook to be published by the denomination following the civil war was highly significant. Many thousands of the hymnbooks were sold. The old hymn gave way to the new and the children of the freedom can sing a new song from their own church book. God, according to Turner is a Negro. Turner included anti-slavery songs, orthodox Wesley hymn and revival songs which he called "The Old Zion Songs". Twenty of the revival songs were credited to Ira D. Sankey's gospel song collections which began to appear in print in 1875.

Two decade after the creation of the first hymnal, Rev. Charles E. Stewart criticized the church hymnody. As one of musically and theologically trained minister of the church, he felt that the hymnal should contain pieces that can stand the test of time. For example, "Battle Hymn of the Republic" "Onward Christian Soldiers", and Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". All the hymns centred on liberation theology (McClain 1990:45).

H. CONCLUSION

The Negroes' spiritual (Black Hymnody) are the song that reveal the history of African-American slaves traumatic experience of slavery. It shows what some Africans had suffered yet remained undaunted in their tribulation. They believed that God knew about what they were passing through and would deliver them at his own time. African slaves saw their predicament as a parallel or in congruent to that of Lord Jesus Christ experience on the cross.

The Negroes also identified their condition with that of the Israelites and believed in freedom which would come at physical death and reign with Jesus Christ in eternity. The unpalatable condition drew them closer to their God. They believed at last that God is God of the oppressed as well as the oppressor; that is the slave and the slave owner. Negroes' spiritual is a kind of hymnody that was imported from the emancipated African slaves with some Charles Wesley revival hymnody to the Africa in collaboration with the western missionaries.

Furthermore, It is recorded that the first African slaves were brought in 1619 to Virginia and all such human trafficking was outlawed by vote of the Congress in 1807; although, many slaves were brought in illegally thereafter. Not until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the war between North and South, and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 were the slave finally free. It took another century for freedom to be transformed into the beginning of first class citizenship (1964) (John 1964: 19).

However, the historical background perusal of the Negroes spirituality reveals that the hymnody is centred on liberation theology, a core African church theology. As a result of this such hymnody was appropriate in their worship. It would make the African church active and their worship experience dynamic.

It is a pity that there is dearth of Negroes spiritual in today's worship songs with exception of few excerpt from it. It is seldom in use while some are not compiled along with the contemporary sacred vocal music. The paper exposes the importance of it. As all other western music used in worship services have their historical background such as a tune of music dedicated to idol; the origin which is even primitive to that of negroes spiritual the negroes spiritual has likewise and should be accepted by the global hymn societies.

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