

The Problematic of African Theology of Inculturation

THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY in Africa seems to mirror that of the continent itself in the sense that it is a very complex history. This “varied and long” history of Christianity in Africa defies all attempts at an easy explanation.¹ One thing that stands out, however, is that Christianity has massively impacted African social and political life, a reason for which Adrian Hastings suggested that much of Africa is inconceivable apart from Christianity.² This notwithstanding, Christianity is also a mixed bag on the socio-political spheres as well. The very Church that offers the citizenry a platform to express their discontent on myriads of political, economic, and even harsh cultural realities has, at times, seemed to reflect the same unjust political tendencies associated with the state machinery.³ This ambiguity in the Church’s role in African socio-political life, particularly in post-independence and post-missionary Africa (1950s–1980s) has resulted in two divergent trends of thought or ideas, each one producing a particular brand of African theology. The first trend is the theological reflections coming out of the social and political struggles of the peoples of South Africa. This reflection produced a black theology of liberation specific to the South African situation. It suggests that while *Christianity has played a positive role in dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and “in the second liberation of many African countries,”*⁴ it has also served as a tool of domination and division, in so far as the apartheid system was rooted (even if only in the view of the practioners of apartheid) in Christian Scripture and tradition. The sec-

1. Englund, “Rethinking African Christianities,” 4.
2. Hastings, “Christianity in Africa,” 208.
3. Ntarangwi, “African Christianity,” 8.
4. Ibid., 2.

ond trend is the theological reflections coming out the other nation-states south of the Sahara as these countries seek political self-determination following colonialism. This theological reflection seeks “integration between the African pre-Christian religious experience and African Christian commitment in ways that would ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.”⁵ The latter trend has been variously experimented using the neologism “inculturation.”

The term inculturation was intended “conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage sensitivity to various cultural contexts.”⁶ At issue was the credibility of the Church in the wake of “the growing sense of disgrace of the colonial powers in their treatment of native peoples of various lands.”⁷ Among Protestants of post-World War II Europe, there was the general feeling that the faith of many European Christians “had proved to be more nominal than real and that European Christianity overall had failed in its obligations to transform culture as well as to oppose elements of culture that had become manifestly evil.”⁸ This sentiment provided the backdrop of H. Richard Niebuhr’s helpful but nonetheless controversial work, *Christ and Culture* (1951) and Paul Tillich’s now famed method of correlation, “by which human experience, understood with sensitivity to cultural diversity, poses questions to which Christianity must provide the orientation for an authentic response if it is to be existentially relevant.”⁹ Beyond safeguarding the integrity of the faith in the gospel encounter with local cultures, the Catholic Church was also concerned with how to re-evangelize those European cultures that were traditionally Christian but have since deviated from their Christian roots and become highly secularized and thus extended the term inculturation to John Paul II’s program of “new evangelization.”¹⁰

The program of “new evangelization” and inculturation resonated well with African bishops and theologians “who saw in it an ally against the consequences of cultural alienation and a guarantee of a genuinely African

5. Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 49.

6. Doyle, “The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism,” 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. *Ibid.* See Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

9. Doyle, “The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism,” 2. See also Tillich, *Systematic Theology*; and Tillich, *A Theology of Culture*.

10. Doyle, “The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism,” 1.

Christianity.”¹¹ Inculturation, in particular, became for Africans still reeling under the onslaught of colonialism an enterprise for which the Church must invest. The program to inculturate Christianity in Africa received, from an African Catholic Christian perspective, its first official authoritative backing at the 1969 meeting of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), Kampala, Uganda. In attendance at the meeting was none other than Pope Paul VI himself who at the time was making a pastoral visit to Africa. The Pontiff declared in no uncertain terms to the African bishops and distinguished guests at the meeting: “You may, and you must have an African Christianity.”¹² The Pope’s declaration came in the wake of his 1967 Apostolic letter *Africae Terrarum* (The Land of Africa) in which he accentuated and paid tribute to the positive values in African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and invited Africans to devise new ways of becoming missionaries to themselves.¹³ Even before the Pope’s declaration that there must be an African Christianity some African theologians were already tapping into the new wave of optimism sweeping across the continent following political independence of many African countries and the religious optimism ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Among their many demands was that there be a recognition of African values and cultures in Christian liturgical services. Their argument was not only that the missionary experiment did not take African cultures into account, but also that terms like “accommodation,” “adaptation,” “contextualization,” and “Africanization” need be embraced as a way of rediscovering what was lost during the missionary and colonial era. Pope Paul VI may have been aware of these demands prior to his *Africae Terrarum* (Land of Africa) and powerful speech to African bishops and theologians in Kampala. What Paul VI’s declaration did, if anything, was give credence to a cry that was already gathering momentum—that there was a need to reconsider previous assumptions about African cultures and worldviews in light of the Gospel in order to arrive at an authentic African Christianity.

In the main, there are two parts of Paul VI’s statement that galvanized theologians searching for an authentic African Christianity. The first was the admonition you may have an African Christianity and the second was the imperative you must have an African Christianity. The tension between

11. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, xi.

12. See full text in Okure and Van Thiel, *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*.

13. See Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*.

the desire to have an African Christianity and the obligation to realize it has dogged the African Church to this day. The first part, i.e., the admonition or desire to have an African Christianity, need not detain us here, in part because it does not demand thoroughness or rigor. In some sense, the demands of the first part have been attained by the different experiments that have gone under the garb of “adaptation,” “localization,” “contextualization,” and “indigenization,” etc. Our concern is rather on the second part, which is still far from being attained, i.e., the imperative “you must have an African Christianity.” The search for an African (Catholic) Christianity is a laborious process demanding rigor. In spite of the fact that the center of gravity of the Christian faith has shifted southwards and millions of Africans have been baptized Catholic, many are still only nominally Christian because the faith has not been truly inculturated. Our contention here is that for the faith to be embedded in the lived lives of the African and be at home in the culture a semiotic approach to inculturation is desirable.

What is inculturation? How might one distinguish between inculturation and black theology? Is inculturation inherently different from black theology of liberation? Should black theology of liberation be limited only to the South African cultural milieu? As a concept, inculturation is related to, but not identical with liberation theology.¹⁴ The connection between black theology of liberation and inculturation is not easy to navigate. There are those who see the two theologies as distinct and as having clearly designated boundaries. But a new empirical understanding of culture, particularly as uncovered by the science of semiotics, has necessitated a revision of previous views that see liberation and inculturation as mutually opposed. Thanks to the science of semiotics, there is now a move towards integration as many of the new studies of Christianity in Africa are now beginning to engage the intersection of ethnicity, identity, and development,¹⁵ as well as the role played by individual Christians in the search for freedom and political self-determination in the new nation-states of Africa.¹⁶ One of the leading voices in this area of integration is the Cameroonian theologian, Jean-Marc Ela (1936–2008), who insists that faith cannot be lived a temporally, but “must address the historical context in which repression and

14. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, xi.

15. See Gifford, *African Christianity*; Ranger, *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa*; Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*; and Patterson, *The Church and Aids in Africa*.

16. Ntarangwi, “African Christianity, Politics, and Socioeconomic Realities,” 2.

dehumanization sustain the powerful in their status and voices for reform are stilled.”¹⁷ To his ideas we turn next.

Setting the Context: Jean-Marc Ela of Cameroon

Jean-Marc Ela was born in 1936 in Ebolowa, a small town in South Cameroon. His parents were both devout Catholics. This was at a time when most of Africa was under colonial rule and France (and Great Britain) controlled most of West Africa. At the time of Ela’s birth Cameroon was technically not a French colony, but what was known according to international law as a trust territory. France nevertheless, exerted a lot of influence in the area and extended its policy of assimilation on this trust territory.¹⁸ Ela, very early on, felt called to the priesthood and after studying philosophy and theology at the seminary in Yaoundé was ordained to the priesthood in 1964. After his ordination he taught at the same seminary in Yaoundé, Cameroon. He also worked briefly with the pygmies of East Cameroon, but abandoned the ministry because of what he described as constant surveillance from government officials. He left for North Cameroon to work with an African priest, Baba Simon Mpecke, who at the time was working among an indigenous Cameroonian group of north Cameroon, the Kirdi people.¹⁹ Baba Simon taught what Ela would later describe as a new self-consciousness. Baba Simon saw Christianity as a “Western” and “imported” product and wrestled with the idea of how to adapt the “imported” product to local customs and practices. Baba Simon’s goal, as Ela describes it, “was to restore to the gospel in Africa its credibility and power of expression, quite apart from the theological discourse, which had developed in Europe.”²⁰ Another thing that impressed Ela about Baba Simon was his austere lifestyle. Thus, when he took up apprenticeship with Baba Simon to work among the Kirdi of northern Cameroon, living austere lifestyle and making the Gospel relevant to the people was sine qua non for Ela who, throughout his ministry as a priest and theologian, had been grappling with how to make Christian

17. Hoekema, “Faith and Freedom in Post-Colonial African Politics,” 39. See also Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*.

18. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 61.

19. See Hetjke “Baba Simon Mpecke of Cameroon, Mentor of Jean-Marc Ela”; and Baskouda, *Baba Simon, le Pere des Kirdis*.

20. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 62.

theology address “the continuous pauperization of the common people by a ruthless and greedy ruling elite and their international collaborators.”²¹

Ela worked under Baba Simon from 1971 to 1985 before interrupting this ministry for further studies in France. His sojourn in France led to two doctoral degrees, one in theology from the University of Strasbourg (1969) and the other in social and cultural anthropology from the Sorbonne in Paris (1978). Even while in France Ela never gave up on his love for the Kirdi people. It was no wonder that he wrote one of his dissertations on the traditional social structures and economic changes among the Kirdi or mountain people of north Cameroon. In the dissertation he espoused what he called *pedagogie du regard* (pedagogy of the look), a pedagogy that aimed to achieve three things: “to see all aspects of a society in a mutual relationship, to involve the population as a subject in social reforms and to enter upon a struggle with fate-thinking.”²²

Apart from the two doctoral degrees he earned in France, Ela was honored with an additional (honorary doctorate) by the Catholic University of Louvain in February 1999. He was described by the University as “one of the most prominent and critically committed thinkers” of Africa.²³ He was also singled out for his dedication to improving “the dialogue between the theological and sociological body of thought of the West and the portrayal of man and the community of values of Bantu Africa.”²⁴ When he left France and returned to Cameroon, Ela continued with the ministry he had begun with the Kirdi people of north Cameroon. His continued work with these indigenous peasants helped him “see clearly both the glaring contradictions of the dominant presence of (Catholic) Christianity and the abject misery and marginalization of the peasants at the hand of the dominant political, economic, and ecclesiastical institutions.”²⁵ These contradictions would become both the basis and point of departure of his theological reflections.

Ela’s theological reflections somehow got him in trouble with the Cameroonian authorities. In 1984 when Cameroon was beset by an unsuccessful but bloody coup d’état that led to a protracted political unrest in the country Ela was among those identified by the military junta as the “bothersome” people to be eliminated for their liberation work and

21. Ngong, “The Theologian as Missionary,” 5.

22. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 63.

23. Ibid., 61

24. Ibid.

25. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 103.

conscience promoting activities.²⁶ The political unrest eventually claimed the lives of prominent clergy men and women, like Yves Lumey, the much beloved and respected bishop of Garoua in north Cameroon, and the Cameroonian Jesuit Engelbert Mveng who was Ela's partner in the struggle for social justice.²⁷ Ela was abroad visiting Louvain-la Neuve, Belgium, as guest lecturer when Mveng was murdered at his home on April 24, 1995. Angered by the death of his beloved friend, on his return from Belgium, Ela preached series of sermons that were critical of the government and the state of affairs in Cameroon.²⁸ Coincidentally, this was about the same time John Paul II was to make a visit to Cameroon to present the conclusions of the African synod of bishops to French-speaking Africa.²⁹ Ela depicted Cameroon as a country that had fallen into the hands of brigands, "supported by the North-Atlantic powers that wish to maintain control over Africa's resources."³⁰ Fearing that his life was more and more in danger, Ela left Cameroon for Canada on August 6, 1995 where he sought asylum. He taught sociology at the University of Quebec, Montreal and spent the rest of his life writing and publishing in Canada until his death in December 2008.

Ela's Shade-Tree Theology

Ela became famous as a theologian with the publications of *Ma Foi d'Africain (My Faith as an African)*³¹ and *Le Cri de l'homme* (translated as *African Cry*),³² a work in which he portrayed the "cry" of the African as a cry of pain. In these works Ela suggests that the damage done to the collective psyche of the African by centuries of slavery and colonization cannot easily be undone by a simple program of de-colonization.³³ His desire to effect the change that de-colonization failed to bring made Ela to brand his theology, not as an African theology,³⁴ but as a theology out of Africa. The difference between the two is subtle and easy to miss. In Ela's time it was very

26. Hetjke, "Thinking in the Scene of Disaster," 72.

27. Ibid., 76.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. See Ela, *My Faith as an African*.

32. See Ela, *African Cry*.

33. Hetjke, "Thinking in the Scene of Disaster," 64.

34. For detailed discussion of the origin and meaning of African theology, see Bujo, *Africa Theology in Its Social Context*.

common for indigenous African clergy men coming out of the experience of colonialism to describe their theology as African theology—their way of distinguishing their theology from what was thought to be European theology taught by Western missionaries. But Ela takes a step further and distinguishes his theology both from the Western missionary practice and from his indigenous African clergy counterparts. His proper term for his theology is “shade-tree theology.” In a 1999 interview on Flemish radio, Ela spoke eloquently about what distinguishes his theology from that of others:

My theology under the tree developed during my period in North-Cameroon. I learnt a lot of things there that I had not learned at school. All day I was among the people in the mountains. I only studied or wrote at night. The gospel contains an enormous potential. On the terraces of the mountain slopes, where they had their small fields, we discussed together matters like the water supply, the soil, the millet. I still remember that the Book of the Prophet Isaiah suggested the subject of the suffering servant: “he had borne our suffering.” During the very week I was reading that, people were forced to pull out their millet plants, in order to plant cotton instead. You cannot eat cotton. So this meant a heavy demand on their (way of) life. They had to pull out those plants, their food! It was like the thrust of a knife in one’s heart. Talking under the tree, that meant not only talking in the shade, because of the heat, but for me, and gradually also for us: the realization of the tree of the Cross, of the suffering. Jesus assumes in his cry on the Cross the sufferings of all the African peoples, all the cries of distress of the world. Paul also speaks about the mystery of Cross. That is where the whole of creation groans.³⁵

Emmanuel Katongole offers an insightful explanation as to why Ela’s theological approach differs from that of many of his contemporaries. Other approaches begin with descriptions of reality and then proceed to see what insights or recommendations theology can throw upon the situation. But Ela sees the description of the situation as the theological reflection itself.³⁶ While working among the Kiridi, for example, Ela developed a habit of holding regular Bible study sessions with them. During one of those sessions he experienced an event that changed the entire process of his reflection and research. Ela had proposed for discussion for that day the topic “God,” to which a young woman objected by retorting “God,

35. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 64.

36. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 103.

God, and after that what?” Ela realized there and then that for this young woman and others like her the question of God has to be reformulated and made relevant to their situation.³⁷ It also made him realize that the question of God has to address the significance of God in a situation of poverty, drought, war, famine, injustice, and oppression. The primary theological task in Africa, therefore, must address “anthropological poverty”—the kind of poverty that strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person.³⁸ It is the kind of poverty that destroys communities and renders people hopeless and useless. Thus, for Ela, the question of God has to be removed from the realm of the abstractly theological to practical human realm where the nitty-gritty of life is lived.³⁹ This is also why Ela brands his shade-tree theology as “a theology that, far from the libraries and offices, develops among brothers and sisters searching shoulder to shoulder with the unlettered peasants for the sense of the word of God in situations in which this word touches them.”⁴⁰

Ela harkens back to the problems besetting the African continent, pointing out that when one looks at the unprecedented high number of refugees and displaced persons in Africa it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Africa is a strangled continent and Kafkaesque. On human rights issues, Ela thinks Africa is like a concentration camp and a gulag—a place where the army swallows up a considerable part of the state budget while the head of state is surrounded by presidential guard that is armed to the teeth.⁴¹ Living in Africa is, for him, a crucible worthy of a “cry.” If Christianity is to be made intelligible in such a debilitating environment, there must be a hermeneutical key for unlocking these problems. Ela’s hermeneutical key for addressing these problems is the “Cross” of Christ. The crucial question for him is: who is Jesus Christ to the African? Accepting an idea

37. Ngong, “The Theologian as Missionary,” 10.

38. Ibid. See also Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation,” 156.

39. Ela’s dedication to the plight of the poor and oppressed has led David Ngong to suggest that Ela was one of the early African thinkers “to call for a new paradigm of mission which is not linked to the interest of the strong and powerful but rather is directed toward those who are marginalized: mission done in weakness and vulnerability.” Ngong correctly points out, in what seems like a validation of Ela’s pace setting work, that the paradigm of mission, which Ela envisioned, is what is practiced today by many of the African churches, particularly those of the Pentecostal/Charismatic persuasion. See Ngong, “The Theology as Missionary,” 11.

40. Ela, *African Cry*, vi.

41. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 65.

that was well formulated by Walter Kasper's,⁴² i.e., that Christology is a conscientious elucidation of the proposition that Jesus is Lord,⁴³ Ela rejects any theological formulation that does not address the African in his or her concrete specific life situation. He makes a simple argument: that since "access to Jesus through the New Testament always involves a process of reading and interpreting from the perspective of the situation and problems with which the church is confronted in history, the version of Christianity received from the churches of the West cannot escape the risk of being reinterpreted in Africa."⁴⁴ His concern was that the theology he inherited from the West did not resonate with his cultural situation. He dismisses, for this reason, any Christological slogan (e.g., "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus is Logos") that does not have analogue in traditional African worldview or that does not resonate with the African. To be clear, Ela is not opposed to the theological meanings behind Christological formulae like "Jesus is Logos." What he questions rather is why such formulae have to be imposed on non-Hellenistic cultures unfamiliar with Greek concepts, worldviews, and ways of life. Take the example of "Jesus is the Logos of God," this concept, as Ela sees it, was elaborated in the fourth century when Constantine embraced Christianity and used Christianity to justify his political ends. For Ela, therefore, the transformation of Christianity by Constantine from "religion of the people" (outlawed religion) to a "civil religion" (religion of the state) in effect makes Christianity a "mechanism of domination."⁴⁵ Ela therefore questions why non-Greco-Roman cultures must be forced to embrace Christological titles like "Lord" and "Master" when these were titles of Roman emperors and potentates that were taken over by the Constantine led Church and ascribed to Christ. "Given the conditions following the fourth century, in which the great dogmas were elaborated, taking an emperor's title and applying it to Christ was not innocent."⁴⁶ Not only is Ela adamant that we cannot repeat tradition as handed down in rote fashion, he also insists that from socio-cultural standpoint, the Roman titles that were applied to Jesus "do not correspond to traditional African concepts."⁴⁷ He insists that what the world church demands is both a pluralism in

42. See Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 15.

43. Ela, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ," 17.

44. *Ibid.*, 18.

45. *Ibid.*, 32.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 19.

worldview and new theological and pastoral approaches that can meet the needs of African Christians. Ela suggests that any attempt to impose a theology exclusively meant for the Hellenistic world on the African amounts to nothing but foreign cultural monopoly. It is imperative for the African therefore, according to Ela, to liberate “the faith of the local churches from formulae that have the effect of obscuring Jesus from being recognized by other people.”⁴⁸ To this end, Ela suggests a kind of (political) theology that fuses inculturation with liberation.

Ela the Inculturation Theologian?

The connection between liberation and inculturation, which is easy to miss, did not escape Ela. Among African theologians Ela was one of those who tried to hold the two threads in dynamic tension in his trademark “shade-tree theology”—a political theology that relates Christianity to socio-economic life of Africa. Ela’s political theology can be likened to the political theology of the German Catholic Johann Baptist Metz (b. 1928) and that of the German reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann (b. 1926). These two theologians incorporated insights from liberation theology in their works. There are some who describe Ela as a liberation theologian because of the parallels they see between his work and that of the Peruvian Catholic Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928). When the University of Louvain awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1999, for example, the University wrongly described him as a critically committed thinker of “liberation theology.”⁴⁹ Emmanuel Katongole has been helpful in showing how misleading it is to refer to Ela’s work exclusively as a work of liberation theology. One cannot deny that there are aspects of Ela’s work that suggest such a designation because Ela does not only forcefully use the language of liberation, he also shares the uncompromising, total commitment to the plight of the poor that one sees in the work of liberation theologians.⁵⁰ Ela’s indignant style of writing, including the employment of biblical theme of Exodus, his criticism of the capitalist market system, economic exploitation, and to some extent his use of Marxist analysis of history—features that have come to characterize liberation theology, as Katongole carefully points out, may indeed give the impression that Ela

48. Ibid., 20.

49. Hetjke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 61.

50. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 103.

is a liberation theologian in the South American liberation theology sense of the term.⁵¹ But the themes of liberation in Ela's work should not be confused with liberation theology. As Katongole correctly points out, liberation theology does not have a monopoly of liberation themes. When Ela uses liberation themes it is only "with a view of a more demanding task, namely, rethinking the whole edifice of Christian faith in Africa."⁵² Thus, when he reflects on the suffering of the African, it is in order to offer analyses of the mechanisms that produce them. And when he uses the incarnation of Jesus as a metaphor of God's liberation of the oppressed and as an analogue for contextualizing the Christian message (inculturation), it is as an attempt to show that in "approaching the major themes of the faith in the perspective of the Incarnation, we can scarcely afford to pass over in silence the human condition as assumed by Jesus of Nazareth."⁵³

Although his primary goal is to hold the themes of liberation and inculturation creatively together, we cannot deny that Ela at times speaks as if he favors what has been conventionally conceived as "liberation" over "inculturation." There is evidence of this, for example, in a 1980 paper titled "From Assistance to Liberation" that Ela gave at the *Jeunesse Etudiante Chretienne* (Pan African Assembly of Catholic Students) in Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania. In the paper he proposed that what was needed in Africa was a theology of liberation, not the theology of inculturation that his peers were preoccupied with.⁵⁴ Critics interpreted this to mean that Ela is dismissive of theology of inculturation. But Ela's preference for "liberation" over the theology of inculturation of his peers should be understood in the context of Ela's overall approach to theology that we pointed out earlier, i.e., his desire to distance himself from the Western theology that he inherited and his desire to separate his theology from those of his peers whom he thought were accepting uncritically the theology they inherited from Western Christian missionaries. There is also the related fact that Ela's so called preference for liberation themes is also his own way of drawing attention to the "paternalism" that goes under the name of inculturation. His criticism of liturgical adaptations is a good case in point. Ela was dismissive of many of the liturgical adaptations approved by Christian missionaries, suggesting that what has been lumped under the name of inculturation was nothing

51. Ibid., 104.

52. Ibid.

53. Ela, *African Cry*, 135.

54. Hetjke, "Thinking in the Scene of Disaster," 67.

but “folkloristic” ritual, which does not serve the African interest. He also argued that what goes under the umbrella of inculturation is “an alibi for leaving other matters out of consideration.”⁵⁵ His favorite example is liturgy in native music, which he thought was merely ritualistic. According to him, what liturgy in native music does to the psyche of African is simply make the African forget that they are oppressed.⁵⁶ For him, “drumming on the tom-tom and the rhythm of the balaphone in church cannot protect the rural population, which has already been crushed by the dictatorship of peanuts, cotton, and cocoa, against the food weapon with which they are threatened.”⁵⁷ Thus, when Ela speaks forcefully about liberation (even if it seems like he is disparaging inculturation) it is in light of this concern that the problems with which the clergy were concerned were not the same as those of ordinary African men and women whose basic rights were flouted daily. “In many of our countries,” he observed, “access to drinking water, a balanced diet, health and hygiene, education or self-determination are, more often than not, luxuries.”⁵⁸ We should promote instead a theology that calls into question all unjust structures, colonial and neocolonial alike. Such a theology, in his view, must first be a sine qua non for learning “to pronounce God and Jesus using the words of our own soil and our own culture.”⁵⁹ Lastly, Ela was also concerned by what he saw as an attempt by some of his peers to split theology of liberation from inculturation, two realities that are not opposed but should be placed in a relation of perichoresis.⁶⁰ Ela insists that the liberation of the oppressed must also be the sine qua non condition for any authentic inculturation of the Christian message.⁶¹ He thinks that once liberation is split from inculturation then the argument in favor of Africanization of the Church becomes ambiguous.⁶²

The challenge of “how to think about, understand and confess Jesus Christ in our cultures and our history fraught with tensions and conflicts

55. Ibid., 71.

56. Ibid., 67.

57. Ibid., 68.

58. Ela, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” 137.

59. Hejtke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 67.

60. Bujo and Muya, *African Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 212; cited in Kattongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 104.

61. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, xvi.

62. Hejtke, “Thinking in the Scene of Disaster,” 67.

as they are,” which Ela set out to address, is not an easy one.⁶³ Ela, as it were, was correct to insist that some kind of liberation is inevitably involved in any attempt to inculturate Christianity, at least in Africa. Rather than jettison him as favoring liberation over inculturation, the question should rather be: what does liberation mean for Ela? There are two ways of understanding Ela’s use of the term liberation. The one is a socio-cultural understanding (freedom from colonial/postcolonial domination) and the other is theological (freedom from Western-style theology).

A. Socio-Cultural Locus of Liberation

Ela usually uses the term *liberation* to mean freedom from harsh political and economic realities. Liberation here is not only freedom from Western domination, but also from African elites who mismanage the resources of their nations. “Ela considers much of the so-called independent Africa to be in fact a neocolonial region. African governments seem to exist to serve the interests of the metropolises of the North in various ways while their own people languish in physical, intellectual and moral poverty.”⁶⁴ Thus, liberation is Ela’s way of calling for a new African world order. Independence for most sub-Saharan African countries came at a time of bitter ideological divide between the Marxist East (led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) and the capitalist West (led by the United States and Great Britain). As one writer explains it, “each side sought to win the allegiance of Africans with advice, technical assistance, and development aid. Each party offered assurance that, when the ideological battles had all been fought and won, it would emerge victorious, delivering the poor and downtrodden from their suffering and ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity for all.”⁶⁵ Faced

63. Ela and Brown, “First Colloquium of African and European Theologians,” 58. This gathering, according to Ela and Brown, was the brain child of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (EAAT), supported by some representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Ela and Brown estimated that about eighty participants from twenty-four countries in Africa, Europe, and America took part in the work of the conference. There were representatives from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Oriental, Orthodox, and several branches of Protestantism. Among African participants there were representatives from the theological faculties of Abidjan, Port Harcourt, Kinshasa, Bangui, and Yaoundé. From Europe were representatives from universities in Leyden, Louvain, Lyon, Paris, Rome, and Berlin, as well as from missionary institutes in France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

64. Magesa, *Review of African Cry*, 255.

65. Hoekema, “Faith and Freedom in Post-Colonial African Politics,” 28.

with the difficult decision of choosing between “the god of capitalism, free markets, and liberal democracy; or the god of socialism, mutual solidarity, and people’s assemblies,”⁶⁶ some of the newly independent African leaders rejected the dichotomy presented by the East-West conflict and sought a new way forward in ideologies or philosophies that were deeply rooted in African cultural systems and symbols. In Tanzania, for example, Julius Nyerere (1922–99) formulated a model of African political and social organization he labelled *Ujamaa*- from the Swahili word “family.” Nyerere insisted that the relations between African citizens must be guided not by the domination and suspicion that undergird the capitalist or socialist ideology, but by mutual trust and shared responsibility of all in a nation where there can be neither servant nor masters but fellow members of an extended political family.⁶⁷ In like manner, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72) developed a philosophy of African personalism similar to that of Nyerere, *Consciencism*.⁶⁸ In Zambia Kenneth Kaunda developed similar concept of African humanism (b. 1924),⁶⁹ while in Senegal Leopold Senghor (1906–2001) developed the concept of *Négritude*.⁷⁰

The political ideals developed by leaders, such as Nyerere, Nkrumah, and Senghor, served both as a myth and a method. As a myth, the ideals were rooted in African history and experience and served as a powerful motivator for political change. As a method, socialism in the African mode was a way of “governing the new states and advancing their welfare: it mandated certain economic and social policies intended to maintain a middle course between the fragmentation and alienation that that prevail under capitalism and the homogenization and repression that too often result when socialism is imposed by political fiat.”⁷¹ But whether as a myth or

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 29.

68. See Nkrumah, *Consciencism*.

69. See Kaunda, *A Humanist in Africa*.

70. See Senghor, *The Foundations of “Africanite”*. Ela dismisses *négritude* when translated as “Blackness.” He thinks Blackness has been used to rationalize injustice and oppress the African. “If Blackness, had its way,” he writes, “Africa would be transformed into one vast reserve for the ethnologist, where they could preserve the past and keep anything from changing . . . For all its vaunting cultural specificity, Blackness only promotes the values of the past, thus espousing a dead view of society, creating a mystique of vain expectation, and doing its best to check the revolt of the hungering masses feeding them soporifics.” See *African Cry*, 124–25.

71. Hoekema, “Faith and Freedom in Post-Colonial African Politics,” 32. In the 1990s South Africa will develop a similar vision of African socialism rooted in African history and experience called *Ubuntu*.

method, the different visions put forward by African leaders each had their own measures of success and failure. If the ideals were based on African history and experience as these leaders purportedly claimed, then why did they fail? While this is not the right place to address such complex issue, perhaps we should quickly point out some of the external and internal factors that contributed to their failure.

There were many factors on the external front. First, “the end of colonialism was by no means the end of Africa’s vulnerability to exploitation or to its dependence on former colonial masters.”⁷² Second, before disengaging from their colonies the colonial leaders did not take serious steps to prepare their colonies for impending independence and self-government. What they did in most cases was that “they simply packed up for home and walked away without looking back.”⁷³ Third, “demands from international banks and development organizations to enact ‘structural reforms’ led to spiraling poverty, diminished state capacity, and massive wealth transfers to domestic and international investors in many African nations.”⁷⁴ Fourth, “because African export economies are heavily dependent on agricultural products and minerals, the collapse of world markets in many such commodities devastated national budgets across the continent.”⁷⁵

Many internal factors also played a role in crippling the political ideologies developed by postcolonial African leaders. First was the lack of authenticity. The ideal of brotherhood that was preached was reneged immediately as the leaders and their allies gained power. As one writer describes it, when these leaders “moved from the forests and the streets into the state house, they settled in all too quickly and granted themselves many of the benefits and prerogatives that their predecessors in the colonial regime had enjoyed, necessitating both high taxes and regular ‘contributions’ from those who stood to gain from their official acts.”⁷⁶ Second, while corruption and nepotism were regular features of colonial life, “the newly independent African office-holders raised them to a high art. Where high government offices had been reserved for Europeans under colonial rule, under self-rule they were often effectively closed to all but the president’s

72. *Ibid.*, 34.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

cousins and cronies.”⁷⁷ Third, where under colonial rule African leaders advocated free and open election, when these same leaders came to office they rethought their position when faced with the prospect of leaving office and in most cases silenced all oppositions and indefinitely extended their terms.⁷⁸ Fourth, “freedom of the press was rare, and fragile, and many a journalist paid for his or her contribution to open political debate by spending time in detention, or worse.”⁷⁹ Finally, when policies were enacted “too often they were implemented by government decree, with insufficient consideration of how they would be received or of their prospects of success.”⁸⁰ A good case in point was the forced movement of Tanzania’s farmers to agricultural communes by the Nyerere government in the 1970s. “Measured simply by population movement the policy succeeded, moving 90 percent of the rural population into newly established agricultural communes. But these produced only 5 percent of the nation’s crops, and the disruption of traditional small hold farming soon turned one of Africa’s leading food exporters into one of its neediest importers, rescued from bankruptcy only by World Bank loans.”⁸¹

This is the social-cultural context of Ela’s call for a new wave of liberation in Africa. He was troubled by “the apparently meaningless existence, the extreme and paralyzing poverty, the violation of basic rights, the colonial and neocolonial violence, [and] the multinational exploitation” that have become commonplace.⁸² It is also the context of his plea that the church must do more than demand “conformity with European cultural norms.”⁸³ In fact, Ela’s theological reflections on these avoidable social and political ills were “not so much directed toward fixing the national political and economic systems as it is directed against the church itself, its own self-understanding, history, and mission.”⁸⁴ What Ela expects of the church is for the church to embody an alternative.⁸⁵ What, after all, is the meaning of solidarity and friendship in a continent where misery and oppression are

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., 35.

81. Ibid.

82. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 105.

83. Hoekema, “Faith and Freedom in Post-Colonial African Politics,” 39.

84. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 106.

85. Ibid.

rife?⁸⁶ How might one speak of salvation in a continent caught in the throes of a struggle with imperialism? Has paper independence not become an obstacle to the self-assertion of the African personality and recognition of their real identity?⁸⁷ In concrete terms, how can the Church witness to the Gospel in an African society where bureaucratized elites plunder the helpless masses of such a great portion of the national income?⁸⁸ How can the church respect African cultural identity when Africa is caught in the clutches of foreign companies that destroy the very concept of self-identity?⁸⁹ These are critical questions that Ela thinks must be answered before genuine inculturation can take place.

B. Theological Locus of Liberation

Ela sees Western-style theology as serving mainly imperial agenda because Christianization and colonization, at least as far as Africa was concerned, “marched shoulder to shoulder.”⁹⁰ In his view, the evangelization of Africa was carried out mainly by missionary institutes who have traits of the West, i.e., Western influence, Western thought systems, Western institutions, and Western traditions. As part of this Western thought systems, he thinks that these missionary institutes employ the same imperial image of Christ that were used as “an alibi for all the crusades.”⁹¹ He thinks the same inner logic is operative in the colonial enterprise in which Christianity and colonization march shoulder to shoulder to places designated pagan by the Church’s hierarchy. When they arrived at these so called pagan places “the ‘Christian’ nations were more preoccupied with the accumulation of riches than with spreading the light of the Gospel.”⁹² Ela, therefore, questions “whether a white church implanted among blacks” can effectively root the “faith and gospel in Africa.”⁹³ Again Ela’s term for putting an end to this kind of exploitation is *liberation*—bringing an end to that brand of theology that has

86. Ela, *African Cry*, 62.

87. *Ibid.*, 131.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, 107.

91. Ela, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 33.

92. *Ibid.*

93. Ela, *African Cry*, 106.

been used in the exploitation of Africa in the guise of evangelization.⁹⁴ “To what extent,” he wrote, “is the situation of the churches of black Africa not a neocolonial situation, analogous to that of stymied societies living in a situation of strict dependency on the great decision-making centers, which are the monopoly of the countries of the northern hemisphere?”⁹⁵ He even wonders whether or not the churches of the so called third-world, since they have been deprived of their texture, are not simply “third churches?”⁹⁶

According to John Mbiti (b. 1931), Ela, in a sense, sees the oppressor as the Latinized structures, traditions, and theology of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁷ His critique here again is two pronged: he is as critical of Church structure as he is of his fellow African priests. The missionary priest may be “a man of the rite, living in a universe of ‘holy days’ in which ordinary life was absent,”⁹⁸ the African priest is equally impotent and inept if he is unable to unlock how the historical dimension of God’s scheme pertains to the African. Ela was referring primarily to the translated version of Church catechism used by African priests in instructing the faithful. Ela’s angst is that the catechism is codified in European thought system and pattern that does not speak to the African. The inability to make the gospel speak to the modern African makes “catechesis abstract, dry, doctrinal, moralizing, legalistic, prescriptive and aimed at meekly reciting the text.”⁹⁹ This makes the activity of the Church in Africa seem like an “assembling part” that tries to replicate an imported model of the “mother plant.”¹⁰⁰ It is for this reason again that Ela argues that liberation, not cultural adaptation, ought to be the obligatory locus of theological research.¹⁰¹ He suggests that just as the West has succeeded in synthesizing faith and reason after centuries of wrestling with the subject, the task of theology from Africa should be how to synthesize faith and liberation.¹⁰² “It is no longer enough to pose the questions of faith on the level of culture alone,” he writes, “we must also pay

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. See Mbiti, “Ascents in African Theology,” 106.

98. Ela, *African Cry*, 70.

99. Ibid., 71.

100. Ibid.

101. Ela, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” 140.

102. Ela, “The Church—Sacrament of Liberation,” 138.

attention to the mechanisms and structures of oppression at work.”¹⁰³ The theological language inherited from the West, he argues, “does not speak to us, it does not move our hearts, [and] it does not communicate our thoughts.”¹⁰⁴ The African church is, therefore, faced with two inexorable alternatives: continue with the way things are and slip into anachronism and become a stranger to the real questions of today’s Africa or become prophetic and daring and revise, not only of the language of theology, but also “all its forms, and all of its institutions, in order to assume the African human face.”¹⁰⁵

The Paradox of the Eucharist

Ela decries what he sees as “the paradox of the Eucharist” in the Christian communities of Africa because he thinks the unfortunate split between inculturation and liberation finds its locus in the liturgy.¹⁰⁶ He thinks the liturgical adaptations undertaken by many in the wake of political independence has proven to be anything but superficial. For him, the manner of celebrating the Eucharist is not only alienating, it also reveals “the domination at the heart of the faith as lived in Africa, within a Christianity that refuses to become incarnate in our peoples.”¹⁰⁷ A context here may be helpful. In the Thomistic theology in which Ela was trained, a distinction was made between the *Matter* of a sacrament (sensible object) and the *Form* of a sacrament (words used by the minister). For the Eucharistic sacrifice, bread and wine are the Matter of the sacrament and the words the priest says over the bread and wine during consecration are the Form of the sacrament. Ela finds both the Matter and Form of the Eucharist to be problematic. Bread and wine, he points out, come from European agricultural products. Wheat and grapes, are not staples of sub-Saharan Africa. The use of these non-traditional African agricultural products, for Ela, has many implications, which cannot be taken lightly.

103. Ela, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” 140.

104. Ela, “The Church—Sacrament of Liberation,” 138.

105. Ela, *African Cry*, 134.

106. *Ibid.*, 1.

107. *Ibid.*, 5.