



Robes of Resistance: Black Women, Church Uniforms, and Decolonial Identity in South African Independent Churches (AICs)

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Abstract

This article explores the socio-cultural, theological, and historical significance of church uniforms in African Independent Churches (AICs) in South Africa, with a focus on how black women navigate, reinterpret, and resist structures of power through religious dress. Adopting a qualitative and decolonial research approach, the paper engages with lived experiences, archival insights, and theoretical frameworks to investigate how church uniforms function as tools of spiritual agency, communal identity, and cultural negotiation. Through historical analysis and theological reflection, the paper examines the evolution of church clothing from its colonial imposition to its contemporary reappropriation as a medium of liberation. Particular attention is given to intergenerational dynamics, gendered hierarchies, and the ways in which visual and embodied theologies are performed by black women in AICs such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Saint John's Apostolic Faith Mission (SJAfM), and the Segal Apostolic Church. The findings underscore the complex role of uniforms as both instruments of conformity and vehicles for resistance, highlighting their function in preserving sacred memory while also facilitating theological innovation.

Keywords: African Independent Churches (AICs), black women, church uniforms, decolonial theory, gender, visual theology, spiritual embodiment, cultural resilience, South Africa.

Introduction

Church uniforms in AICs function as more than mere attire for worship; they represent faith, culture, memory, and identity. These garments possess significant symbolic meaning, especially for black women in South Africa and the broader African continent, who have traditionally embraced them as tools of spiritual affiliation and socio-cultural empowerment within religious contexts. Church uniforms provide collective identity, embody theological significance, and present visual theologies that are essential to the liturgical and ritual practices of AICs (Mbiti, 2001; Mndende, 1998). They function as indicators of status, age, marital status, and spiritual vocation, particularly within institutions such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Saint John's Apostolic Faith Mission (SJAfM), and the Segal Apostolic Church, which the researcher recently investigated (Lukhaimane, 1980; Landman, 2006; Makgaga, 2024).

Historically, the imposition of Western apparel through missionary efforts transformed African religious and cultural identity, frequently in gendered and racialised manners (Comaroff, 2002; Welty, 2005). Missionaries frequently imposed dress expectations on African women that were associated with ideas of modesty, reverence, and servitude (Gaitskell, 1983). However, black

women in AICs have resisted these constraints by converting uniforms into symbols of resistance, memory, and empowerment. Clothing that was formerly employed to conceal indigenous identity have transformed into instruments of cultural recovery and spiritual agency (Vellem, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

This paper employs a qualitative and decolonial research framework, grounded on the concept that knowledge and religion should be reclaimed from the lived experiences of historically marginalized individuals. A decolonial theory is a framework focused on the critical analysis and challenge of colonial legacies and oppressive mechanisms that continue to perpetuate social inequalities (Lehmann, 2021). The fundamental principle of decoloniality centres on the reconstruction of the world to empower those who were "enslaved," "colonized," and "exploited" to reclaim their intrinsic existence ("ontological density"), capacity for self-expression ("voice"), territorial ownership ("land"), historical narrative ("history"), knowledge, and authority (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:23). Furthermore, this paper focuses on the perspectives, and experiences of black South African women within AICs, examining the intersection of their use of church uniforms with spiritual practice, gender dynamics, and cultural resilience. The fundamental assertion is that church uniforms are not fixed symbols, but rather dynamic instruments through which black women present divinity, recover religious authority, and navigate identity in both historical and present South African contexts. These uniforms provide a unique identity and facilitate the standardization of appearance, therefore promoting common ideals and collective purpose, but also adapting to changing socio-cultural contexts. Primarily worn by indigenous populations, their evolving patterns signify greater historical shifts. Moyse (2009) provides a pertinent comparison in her examination of the transformation of a women's religious assembly founded in 1876 by the spouse of a Victorian vicar—into a significant influence in contemporary Christianity. Moyse demonstrates, via a multidisciplinary perspective, how religious beliefs and changing concepts of femininity and motherhood strengthened traditional women in colonial and post-colonial contexts, allowing them to exert influence within households, communities, and religious organizations. In contrast to feminist historiography, which frequently emphasizes institutionalized political action, her work underscores how the profound spiritual convictions of ordinary women established them as early advocates and leaders. African women's prayer groups, known as *manyano/s*, originated in the 1920s as grassroots forums for solidarity and spiritual resistance, influenced by missionary activities and the impacts of industrialization on Black families (Haddad, 2004; 2016). In this context, church uniforms could possibly be perceived as extensions of spiritual networks tangible manifestations of agency, identity, and resilience.

Theoretical and Historical Framework

The ZCC, founded by Engenas Lekganyane in the early 20th century, is the largest AIC in Southern Africa (Lukhaimane, 1980). This church has millions of adherents throughout Southern Africa and is characterized by its hierarchical organisation, focus on discipline, and incorporation of African cultural traditions into Christian liturgy. The church's rituals encompass healing, prophecy, and music, particularly through the unique *mokhukhu* dance executed by men. Men and women wear distinct colours to denote responsibilities, status, and levels of spiritual development, with green representing healing, white symbolizing purity, and brown indicating humility and servitude. Women's clothing is frequently characterized by age and marital status, with head coverings and sashes indicating these differences (Lukhaimane, 1980).

Saint John's Apostolic Faith Mission (SJAFM) was established by prophetess Christinah Nku in the 1920s and evolved into one of the most prominent prophetic churches in South Africa, led by a woman. Nku's ministry integrated traditional healing procedures, mystical visions, and

Christian theology. Her establishment of the church signified a crucial transformation in gender dynamics within AICs, where women were seldom acknowledged as leaders. In the SJAFM, women's blue garments and white headscarves symbolise prayer, healing, and dedication to divine service (Landman, 2006; Masondo, 2015). Nku's spiritual authority and the visual symbolism of uniforms validated women's involvement and leadership in the spiritual sphere, despite the persistence of patriarchal limitations.

The Sega Apostolic Church, despite its small size as compared to the two above mentioned churches, possesses theological and cultural importance within its local environment. Situated in Atteridgeville but originating from rural Limpopo, South Africa, the church prioritizes cleanliness, prayer, and river baptisms as essential spiritual practices. Makgaga (2024) states that the church's overall membership across all branches is below 20,000 individuals.

The ZCC headquarters is located at Zion City Moria, near Polokwane in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Müller (2015: 174) concedes that the figures about the ZCC in South Africa may be imprecise, however he approximates the membership at around 5 million. Kruger and Saayman (2016: 27) assert that attendance at the ZCC conferences in South Africa can surpass 3 million individuals. The reported data does not account for diaspora members, indicating that the actual number may be far higher. Daneel (2000b:312) asserts that the ZCC is presently seeing the most accelerated growth of any church in this nation. Churches such as the ZCC in South Africa are recognized for their reconfiguration of Christianity in Africa, rendering the gospel pertinent to the African populace within the African context via divine healing and prophecy. This is one of the factors that render the ZCC and other AICs so prominent in the religious landscape of Africa and beyond (Kgatlé 2024:2).

The SJAFM headquarters is located in Evaton, Gauteng Province, South Africa. According to Landman (2006), the church that emerged from the 1972 schism, along with continuous attempts to consolidate the several factions of St. John's churches, presently consists of 39 distinct entities. Information is often provided on a per-congregation basis by publications, scholarly sources, or the churches themselves, rather than for the entire movement. Consequently, a comprehensive total for membership in 2025 is unavailable.

Uniforms in the Sega Apostolic Church are intricately linked to ceremonial purity and preparedness for heavenly interaction (Makgaga, 2024). The uniform is regarded as both a spiritual shield and a visible affirmation of church doctrines, signifying membership within the sacred society. It is distinguished by its emphasis on aquatic rites, river baptisms, and communal healing. Uniforms in this context serve not just as institutional identifiers but are also cleansed through prayer and prophecy. The church perceives the act of wearing uniforms as an indication of spiritual maturity and divine vocation, emphasizing colour coding and appropriate behaviour

Church uniforms in AICs should be comprehended within the extensive historical framework of colonisation and the proliferation of Christian missionary activities in Africa. Beginning in the early 19th century, European missionaries regarded traditional African clothing as indicative of barbarism and ethical deficiency (Comaroff, 2002). Clothing emerged as a vital instrument in the missionaries' endeavour to 'civilize' African converts. Converts were subsequently expected to forsake indigenous garments in favour of modest, Western-style clothing that embodied Christian respectability and European standards of discipline and cleanliness (Welty, 2005). These exterior modes of attire were not only indicative of new religious allegiance, but instruments of cultural reconditioning and political domination. The gendered aspect of this 're-dressing' procedure was evident. Missionary women frequently undertook the responsibility of educating African girls and women on the ideals of acceptable

Christian femininity, characterized by docility, domesticity, and modesty (Labode, 2021; Gaitskell, 1983). Modest attire was associated not just with Christian identity but also with acceptable femininity and social decorum. This enforced cultural narrative effectively relegated black African women to submissive roles within colonial and religious hierarchy. The regulation of women's clothing through prescribed dress standards strengthened a patriarchal theology that was disseminated from Europe and imposed on African religious contexts (Labode, 2021)

Nonetheless, African reactions to these missionary dress regulations were anything but passive. Over time, black believers in South Africa began to recontextualize church uniforms, infused them with indigenous spiritual significance. Church uniforms evolved from symbols of religious compliance to representations of identity and defiance. The incorporation of Western-style religious attire into AIC uniforms indicated a movement towards cultural reclamation (Haddad, 2016). These clothes got integrated into African ceremonial practices through a lengthy process of indigenisation, symbolising healing, purity, ancestral connection, and communal discipline (Mndende, 1998). The uniforms serve not just as a visual aesthetic but also as a theological instrument imbued with ancestral symbolism and cosmological significance. African ethical and cosmological philosophy further corroborates this viewpoint.

Church uniforms consequently emerged as a domain of both continuity and disruption. According to Vellem (2013), they serve as counter-hegemonic instruments in the pursuit of epistemic freedom. Church uniforms embody what he terms a 'spirituality of liberation', wherein black South Africans reconfigure Christianity to validate African identity and cosmology. Mndende (1998) also emphasises how black South Africans, especially within AICs, redefined religious garments through indigenous cosmologies. Church uniforms consequently evolved from implements of colonial domination into symbols of social identification and reverent expression. The adoption of robes, headscarves, and belts, frequently distinguished by colour, denotes theological principles including purity, healing, and spiritual hierarchy. In African spirituality, colours possess considerable significance and are said to have spiritual meaning. This conviction is expressed in the vivid and varied colours of liturgical vestments in AICs. Bvuma (2024:118) asserts that various hues may symbolise distinct spiritual conditions, seasons, or communications. For instance, the colour white frequently signifies purity and sanctity, whereas other colours may represent healing, strength, or protection. Dube (1994:114-116) asserts that colours are not chosen randomly, instead, they are revealed in dreams, visions, and ceremonies. Green, denoted as narrative, symbolizes origins and legacy. Red and black are rarely employed in AICs, as red represents blood, considered "taboo," while black is often associated with death (Dhlamini, 2016:17).

Maat, the ancient Egyptian principle of cosmic equilibrium and order, and Mupasi, an indigenous Zambian theological framework centred on communal welfare and ancestral harmony, offer perspectives for interpreting the theological significance of AIC uniforms (Zucconi, 2007; Nalwamba, 2017). From this perspective, ecclesiastical garb transcends mere external demonstration of devotion, however, it constitutes an ethical and cosmological act rooted in the African belief in the interconnection of body, attire, and spirit (Mbiti, 2001). The connection between colonisation and ecclesiastical attire is closely linked to wider political and religious changes. Colonisers perceived African practices, especially clothing, as barbaric, leading missionaries to enforce Western-style clothing that represented virtue and civilization. This re-clothing idea was frequently characterised as a "cleansing" of the African body from sin or primitivism. The adoption of European clothing was accompanied by missionary principles of discipline, humility, and subservience, particularly for women. Over time, African attendees adapted these clothes to embody religious beliefs and cultural behaviours that align with local cosmologies (Sanneh, 2003; Bediako, 1995; 1997).

The decolonial turn, pioneered by scholars such as Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Vellem (2013), necessitates a critical re-evaluation of Western epistemologies that have historically marginalized African spiritualities. Church uniforms, in this context, serve as epistemic places of resistance that embody doctrines asserting African worldviews through visual and material culture. Wiredu (1998) and Zucconi (2007) contend that the aesthetics and ethics of African religion frequently intersect in symbols such as clothing, dance, and ritual. Wiredu (1998) pushes for conceptual decolonisation, encouraging African scholars to engage with African cultural realities instead of imposed Western paradigms. Applying this concept to AIC uniforms illustrates how black women manifest religiosity through attire, enacting rituals that sustain communal memory and validate ancestral knowledge. Church uniforms function as communicative systems that convey spirituality through fabric, colour, rhythm, and shape, connecting the individual to the community, the present to the past, and the physical to the divine. Furthermore, church uniforms serve as a medium of visual and spiritual expression. They are not only clothing but intricately encoded symbols that communicate spiritual authority, gender roles, and societal hierarchy.

In AICs, various colours and clothes represent spiritual roles: white denotes purity, blue symbolises healing, and red signifies power. These visual codes are imparted, inherited, and embodied. They constitute a nonverbal spiritual manifestation, directly associating attire with theology. This is especially apparent in the ZCC, where standardised *mokhukhu* dancing rites reflect theological principles concerning order, spiritual struggle, and sacred existence. Contemporary church costumes embody this intricate tradition. They are worn not merely as symbols of religious affiliation but as indicators of historical struggle, cultural pride, and gendered resistance. The theoretical and historical context of church uniforms in AICs must be examined through the perspectives of colonial history, feminist theory, African cosmology, and decolonial critique. This theoretical framework is grounded in decolonial theory, particularly the concept of 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This viewpoint asserts that colonialism did not conclude with political independence but continues through epistemic violence and cultural erasure. Church uniforms are reinterpreted as acts of epistemic defiance, representing demonstrations of African knowledge and holy existence. According to Labode (2021) and Gaitskell (1983), the clothing of African women emerged as a locus for both regulation and transformation. Mndende (1998) and Mbiti (2001) contend that Africans exercised agency by adapting Christian practices and symbols to align with their cultural and spiritual surroundings. Church uniforms started to integrate traditional symbols, patterns, and their significance. The headscarf, once a sign of missionary modesty, evolved into a potent emblem of African womanhood and spiritual authority.

The reappropriation of religious attire constitutes what Mignolo (2011); Maldonado -Torres (2007) refer to as the 'epistemic disobedience' of the colonised. Although coloniality endures via knowledge systems and institutions that undermine African epistemologies, AIC uniforms restore prominence to African spirituality. These clothing, through their visible and material existence, counteract the obliteration of African subjectivity. Vellem (2014:1-7) characterizes this as a "spirituality of liberation," in which black African Christians employ liturgical rituals, including clothing, to validate local worldviews and challenge Eurocentric theological conventions. Contemporary church clothes embody this intricate tradition. They are worn not merely as symbols of religious affiliation but as indicators of historical struggle, cultural pride, and gendered resistance. The theoretical and historical context of church uniforms in AICs must be examined through the perspectives of colonial history, feminist theory, African cosmology, and decolonial critique. The historical development of church uniforms in AICs demonstrates a profound connection to colonial and missionary influences. Early Christian missionaries disseminated Western attire as an element of their 'civilizing mission,' associating clothing with salvation, morality, and cleanliness (Comaroff, 2002). They implemented dress regulations that represented both spiritual conversion and cultural capitulation.

Welty (2005) demonstrates that these aesthetic traditions maintained the racial hierarchies of colonialism and apartheid. Dress rules in mission schools and churches not only distinguished the saved from the unsaved but also defined gender roles, with black women being transformed into 'respectable' Christian domestics. The enforcement of clothing standards evolved into a tool for moral oversight and cultural repression. The historical and theoretical development of AIC uniforms demonstrates their intricacy and religious importance. Historically tools of colonial control, these church uniforms have been reappropriated as expressions of African spirituality, gendered autonomy, and cultural memory. They exist at the confluence of resistance, ritual, and religious identity, especially for black women who persist in reinterpreting their faith via the medium of fabric.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodological approach. Qualitative research includes many viewpoints such as interpretive, postmodern, feminist, and critical methods, alongside particular ideas like positivist, postpositivist, humanistic, and naturalistic interpretations of human interactions (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992:4). Data was gathered via observation and personal interviews with women from the ZCC (Atteridgeville), SJAFM (Mamelodi East), and Sega Apostolic Church (Atteridgeville), and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Stratified sampling was applied to categorise homogeneous persons into sub-populations (the three churches under examination), all of which belong to a certain homogeneous category (AICs). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa to conduct the interviews.

Discussion

Structures of oppression and social control within AICs, particularly for black women, are also reflected in church uniforms (Gaitskell, 1983; Masondo, 2015). Although church uniforms are sometimes advocated as emblems of spiritual equality, humility, and communal identification, they have, in fact, historically supported patriarchal structures among several AICs. Despite the biblical motivation for humility and justice, uniforms have occasionally been appropriated to denote rank, spiritual superiority, or gendered expectations, thereby undermining the egalitarian principles inherent in Christian doctrine. Consequently, the materiality of the uniform while grounded in spiritual symbolism can serve as a visible indicator of exclusion or control, particularly for women and 'subjugate' members.

The regulation of women's clothing has been employed to preserve gendered power dynamics, as leadership roles in numerous AICs are predominantly male. Church uniforms for women are frequently linked to the principles of silence, modesty, and submission, values that are consistent with the broader societal expectations of African women under both traditional and colonial patriarchies. Church uniform regulations have been implemented by certain AIC leaders to regulate the appearance of females. These regulations include stringent restrictions on the length of sleeves, the height of skirts, the use of head coverings, and the selection of permissible colours (Haddad, 2004). These codes are frequently defended through theological reasoning, which portrays disobedience as a spiritual failure. In practice, this restricts the autonomy of women in both the church and the broader society. Institutionalized expectations regarding attire and conduct were enforced on prophetic women, including Christinah Nku, who achieved prominence through spiritual leadership (Landman, 2006).

To comprehend the uniform's complete significance, it is necessary to recognize its dual function as a symbol of spiritual empowerment and social regulation. These contradictions are navigated by Black women daily, as they simultaneously negotiate their liberation and affirm

their faith. The use of church uniforms by these individuals is a form of resistance and compliance, a declaration of their presence in environments that may otherwise be inaccessible to them. The function of church uniforms in AICs is multifaceted, serving as religious garments, moral signifiers, and socio-political statements. They establish spiritual roles and statuses on a theological level. To symbolise prayer and recovery, women in certain AICs may wear blue or red clothing. Belts and jackets are worn by male elders to signify discipline and leadership (Lukhaimane, 1980). The divine mission and community expectation are conveyed through these garments.

Church uniforms are intended to diminish visible class disparities among members of the congregation, so reinforcing the Christian tenet of spiritual equality before God (Bulla, 2015). However, this apparent uniformity may be misleading, as underlying socioeconomic inequalities remain evident, exemplified by the disparity between a congregant who walks home and another who leaves in a luxury vehicle. Thus, while uniforms symbolically diminish economic hierarchies during worship, they do not eradicate immediate feelings of inequality. Still, they concurrently perpetuate inequalities predicated on gender and age. In certain AICs, unmarried women are required to wear white church uniform to symbolise chastity and submission, while married women are required to wear coloured church uniform to reflect their nurturing obligations (Tucker, 2018).

In male-dominated religious environments, Black women have worn church uniforms to establish spiritual and cultural autonomy. Women's prayer circles, the Mothers' Union, and the Manyano movement are all examples of how dress codes facilitate the formation of collective identity and grassroots theology (Gaitskell, 1983; Haddad, 2016). These women are not passive recipients of church norms; rather, they reinterpret religious symbols to promote social justice, care ethics, and leadership development. The sacred significance of church uniforms is further emphasised by the prophetic tradition in AICs. Christinah Nku's leadership in the SJAFM employed uniforms to legitimise female authority. Nku's vision of a healing church, which was founded on spiritual power and ideals, was executed through community rituals, white hats, and blue garments (Landman, 2006; Masondo, 2015).

Oral testimonies and lived experiences demonstrate how church uniforms represent theological significance, community memory, and the resistance of black women against marginalization and erasure in religious and social settings. Church uniforms in AICs serve as liturgical garments, ethical signifiers, and socio-political statements on various levels. A recent study by Bvuma (2024) has deepened our understanding of the many functions of church uniforms in African Independent Churches (AICs). Bvuma (2024) asserts that for Black South African women, uniforms functioned as a means of resisting colonial power. These ecclesiastical garments symbolized a unique identity and autonomy, differentiating them from the mission churches founded by European colonizers. Haddad (2016) demonstrates how the Mothers' Union in South Africa reaffirmed uniform patterns as a sign of post-colonial activity and neo-indigenous Anglican identity. Dube (2024) argues that uniforms, intended to promote spiritual commitment and unity, may reinforce internal hierarchies, as only some persons are authorized to wear them, therefore confusing equality with stratification. These examples illustrate that church uniforms in AICs serve simultaneously as spiritual attire, ethical guidelines, socio-economic equalizers, and political symbols.

In the churches under investigation, mothers would wear distinct uniforms to symbolise prayer and healing. Belts and jackets are worn by male elders to signify discipline and leadership (Lukhaimane, 1980). The divine mission and community expectation are conveyed through these clothes.

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Sacred Embodiment and Church Uniforms

The human body is fundamental to divine connection and theological expression in AICs due to the embodied nature of spiritual practice. In this context, church uniforms are not merely 'garments', they serve as a second 'epidermis' through which theology is enacted and faith is executed (Mbiti, 2001). Church uniforms function as visible worship practices, influencing spatial interaction, gesture, and posture during collective processions, healing rituals. Wearing the uniform is a daily spiritual discipline for numerous black women in AICs, which authenticates their membership and divine vocation.

In the ZCC, male performers wearing uniforms synchronize their movements as a collective act of worship during *mokhukhu* performances, sacred processions, and choreographed dances. These actions convey theological order, divine harmony, and communal strength (Mapaya, 2013; Vellem, 2014). The spiritual unity and hierarchical order within the church are symbolised by the physical alignment of bodies in church uniform during these performances. The physical representation of women is equally significant. In numerous AICs, the white robes that women wear during sacred rituals, such as river baptisms or healing services, symbolise ancestral presence, spiritual preparedness, and purification. These attires are not merely a reflection of a state of being, they also facilitate sacred encounters. To evoke ancestral energy and divine healing, followers enter rivers barefoot and dressed in white, a practice that Mbiti (2001) refers to as "practical theology."

The experience is not merely metaphysical or symbolic; it encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual components (Macallan, 2012:195). Therefore, church uniforms serve as a partition between the spiritual and material realms. It is sanctified through prayer, regulated through ritual, and inhabited through belief. Mndende (1998) observes that these garments are frequently consecrated prior to being worn, which emphasises their sacred nature. The uniform facilitates a reorientation of the self for numerous black women, transforming their commonplace bodies into vessels of sacred authority.

In South African AICs, Black women undergo an embodied transformation when they adopt the church uniforms, as Bvuma (2024) asserts. When they are dressed in sacred garb, their 'commonplace bodies' or socially overlooked bodies become agents of spiritual authority and prayer ministry. Dube (2024) also demonstrates that uniforms are only granted to individuals who have been recognised for meeting spiritual criteria established by the church. Consequently, the church uniform serves as a visible symbol of divine accountability and belonging.

Additionally, control and discipline are also a component of sacred embodiment through church uniforms. Mwaura (2007) has observed that uniforms embody a code of conduct that necessitates the wearer to internalize modesty, order, and decorum. The disciplinary aspect of sacred attire reflects the empowering and constraining aspects, particularly for women who are navigating religious expectations and cultural norms. Church uniforms in AICs become a site of lived theology, spiritual resistance, and cultural memory because of these embodied

practices. For instance, women in uniform are expected to maintain spiritual discipline and decorum during the annual pilgrimage to *Moria*. The posture, stillness, and coordinated attire of the individuals serve as an embodied theology, a form of reverence that connects the “visible and invisible” realm (Van Cappellen & Edwards, 2021). This means that clothing, as a complex means of communication, is intertwined with fundamental directional processes within communities and has geographical dimensions which are connected with religious sites (Höpflinger, 2014). These components collectively form a unified social organism and 'brand', reinforcing the connection between the physical and spiritual realms in religious practice.

. Another example is that in the SJAFM, women frequently receive their uniforms following a period of spiritual preparation, which includes prayer and fasting. Initially, it is imperative that the elders pray over it. This is because the cloth is considered unholy until one is prepared in spirit. It is imperative to recognize that it is not merely fabric, it is also a source of power. This church uniform must be worn during healing sessions, including the act of laying hands on the sick, anointing them with oil, and chanting spiritual hymns. The church uniform acts as a concrete channel for divine healing, offering spiritual empowerment and enforcing a responsibility to comply with stringent standards of attire and conduct to maintain its sacred status. Even if non-congregants attend the church in informal clothes which some may consider inadequate or inexpensive, they must preserve a decent and modest look appropriate for religious environments. The material's cost is irrelevant to its appropriateness. What matters most is that the uniform represents modesty, prestige, and spiritual discipline.

Church Uniforms, Memory, and Change

Church uniforms in AICs serve not only liturgical and theological functions, but also perform critical cultural labour in the preservation and negotiation of intergenerational identity. They are transmitted from mothers to daughters and serve as tangible representations of spirituality, tradition, and lineage. During life milestones, such as baptisms, confirmations, or marriages, uniforms are sewn, thereby embodying memory and ritual (Anderson, 1999). These garments function as repositories of familial and communal identity, uniting women across generations in a shared spiritual and cultural tapestry. In many AICs, older women are responsible for the preservation of dress traditions, ensuring that the sacred meanings of colours, designs, and accessories are accurately interpreted and transmitted. In their capacity as elders, they serve as ‘theologians of fabric’, protectors of community ethics and ritual codes. In this manner, uniforms promote continuity and order, thereby establishing a foundation of values that transcend modern fragmentation and individualism among community members. In a world that is swiftly evolving, church uniforms preserve sacred practices by encoding unwritten liturgical knowledge.

Nevertheless, these practices are not without controversy. Younger generations within AICs frequently challenge the rigidity of traditional dress codes in contexts that are becoming more urban and diasporic. Several younger members either refute stringent gender-based attire or reinterpret traditional elements through more contemporary fashion lenses. For example, while elders may require women to wear ankle-length skirts and head coverings, young people in urban AIC congregations may modify these garments to accommodate modern aesthetics, thereby integrating personal expression with church identity. This matter is not solely driven by financial considerations. Nevertheless, Bvuma (2024) underscores the necessity of improving the affordability and accessibility of uniforms to guarantee that they are accessible to all congregations at a reasonable price. This would eliminate the financial obstacles that would otherwise prevent individuals who are interested in truly engaging in the fundamental

ceremonies and life within the church. Together, these criteria foster a culture that is more sustainable, adaptable, and inclusive within AICs. Bvuma (2024:170) encourages AICs to facilitate discussions among their youth regarding the significance and relevance of church uniforms. This involvement guarantees the preservation of heritage while also facilitating the adaptation to modern cultural expressions. In churches such as the SJAFM, younger women frequently incorporate contemporary elements into their attire, including fashionable footwear and stockings. This indicates that young people do not inherently regard church uniforms as archaic, instead, they recognise the potential for transformation and reinterpretation that preserves spiritual significance and modesty.

This negotiation of meaning is influenced by broader societal changes, such as the ongoing debates surrounding gender equality, the increasing prevalence of global fashion patterns, and the increasing digital connectivity. Young AIC members have been able to document and redefine the meaning of church uniforms in a manner that combines innovation with fidelity to tradition, thanks to digital platforms (Robertson, 2020). Although this occasionally results in tension between generations, it also encourages the necessary dialogue regarding the adaptability and relevance of African spirituality in a globalized era. For example, the ZCC demonstrates this tension by prohibiting the use of smartphones on its premises. This ban is not merely a matter of technological resistance, it is a reflection of a more profound theological concern: the preservation of the sanctity of ritual space and the limitation of external scrutiny or surveillance that could potentially profane sacred practices. Visual documentation, such as filming or photographing, is believed to expose sacrosanct performances to misinterpretation, commodification, or spiritual contamination, according to the ZCC leadership, who regard the church environment as spiritually consecrated. In this regard, the restriction enforces internal discipline, safeguards ritual secrecy, and emphasises the church's dedication to preserving a spiritually protected environment, despite the pressures of modern technology.

Consequently, church uniforms become the focal point of social transformation and theological debate. Dube (2024) demonstrates that church uniforms in the United Baptist Church (UBC) in Zimbabwe represent both devotion and problematic notions of spiritual hierarchy and gender roles, leading to discourse on access, authority, and inclusion. He contends that Christians have to dress modestly, however, this does not imply that they ought to possess church uniforms to differentiate among themselves. If preserved, church uniforms should be used to foster uniformity and a sense of belonging among all individuals (Dube, 2024: 78). In the African diaspora, most notably the Caribbean and North America, worshippers of AICs continue to wear church uniforms as expressions of ethnic pride and religious identification. Nonetheless, they also evolve into arenas for theological discourse around respectability, gender norms, and decolonial manifestations of faith.

They are dynamic instruments for cultural negotiation, yet they also bear the weight of history. The depth and resilience of AICs, as well as the central role of black women in maintaining and reimagining them, are revealed by their dual role as conservers of sacrosanct heritage and as mediums of spiritual reinvention. Digital platforms have enabled the integration of AIC aesthetics with contemporary fashion, thereby enabling the interpretation of apparel in new ways (Robertson, 2020). The evolving theology of AICs is revealed by this tension. Reformists prioritize contextual relevance, while traditionalists prioritize spiritual discipline through attire. This discussion creates an opportunity for theological discourse regarding continuity, culture, and change.

Conclusion

This paper has thoroughly examined the importance of church uniforms in AICs in South Africa, emphasizing how black women have historically and presently redefined these clothes

as symbols of spiritual agency, cultural resilience, and theological expression. Utilizing a comprehensive historical and decolonial framework, the paper detailed the evolution of church uniforms from colonial tools of compliance to significant artifacts of Africanized theology. Church uniforms in AICs serve as theological texts, ethical signifiers, and spiritual armour rather than simply garment items. They signify rites of passage, encapsulate cosmological significance, and delineate communal borders, especially among black women whose interaction with these garments is profoundly anchored in ancestral wisdom, ritual practice, and holy embodiment. Black women have actively redefined church uniforms through healing ministries, prophecy, music, prayer, and leadership, rather than merely accepting enforced conventions. The case studies of the ZCC, SJAFM, and the Segal Apostolic Church demonstrated the many uses of uniforms in expressing theological authority, spiritual hierarchy, and cultural memory. These churches illustrate the diversity of African Christian expressions and highlight how uniforms facilitate the connection between the sacred and the social, as well as the corporeal and the spiritual.

AIC uniforms embody overarching principles of decolonial resistance, feminist interpretation, and the affirmation of African cosmologies within religious practices. Through visual, material, and embodied theology, Black women utilize ecclesiastical garb to counteract erasure, reclaim agency, and redefine religious engagement. Their uniforms serve as embodied theology, activities through which abstract teachings are enacted, recalled, and transmitted throughout generations. Generational tensions persist about the way uniforms are worn, interpreted, and regulated. For example, while elders may mandate ankle-length skirts and head coverings for women, youngsters in urban AIC congregations may modify these clothing to align with modern aesthetics, merging ecclesiastical identification with individual expression. Younger women may opt for tighter-fitting gowns that gently challenge conventional norms, regardless of dress length. This frequently results in discord with appointed 'uniform policewomen' within the church, usually senior women responsible for enforcing dress code compliance. These uniformed monitors may openly admonish or scold younger women, underscoring how church dress serves as a locus of intergenerational negotiation, moral regulation, and theological boundary preservation.

This conclusion affirms the papers 'primary assertion, that church uniforms in AICs function as dynamic, performative manifestations of African spirituality, influenced by the lived experiences of black women. They contest Western theological paradigms, validate indigenous cosmologies, and offer alternative frameworks for comprehending the sacred. Future research should further examine the intersection of material culture, gender, and African spirituality, especially in contexts characterized by persistent colonial legacies and where embodied practices function as crucial means of resistance and renewal. The future direction of the study must incorporate an examination of the biblical explanations and theological teachings that underpin the constant patterns, colours, and symbols of AICs to understand their profound spiritual symbolism and theological relevance. Analyse the financial impact of church uniforms on members, focusing on their ability to afford to obtain them. This can be achieved by evaluating how church uniforms reduce disparities in class among parishioners.

The study's limitations stem from the ZCC church's rigorous standards, which have led many women to be reluctant to divulge additional details. Consequently, data gathering was restricted to observation. The researcher was obligated to follow a strict approach to conduct interviews with women at the SJAFM and Segal Apostolic Church. Although the study focused solely on women, the researcher received authorisation to proceed from male officials, including the pastor, indicating that these churches remain misogynistic.



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