




# Colonial hymns and Black Spirituals in the context of decoloniality: A theological reflection of Reverend Shadrack Ushewokunze's songs

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## Abstract

Methodist hymns are attributed to Charles Wesley. Most scholars in Methodist studies, theology, and religion have paid attention to his hymns. In contrast, not much attention had been given to hymns by Black Methodists that contributed to the African history, culture, spirituality, and music genres. With ten hymns, Reverend Ushewokunze tops the list of songs by the Black Methodists, and yet there is no scholarly literature that theologises his hymns written during the colonial era. Using the decolonial framework and qualitative methodology, this paper aims to argue that Ushewokunze's hymns represent the spirituals of the Black Christians in Zimbabwe and how they used songs to respond to their spiritual suffocation. Ushewokunze's composition of hymns at the height of the colonial era underscores the experiences of the Black Christians which they expressed through spirituals as a tool of decoloniality. The paper defined colonial hymns and Black spirituals. It also presents the historical background of Reverend Ushewokunze and how these humble beginnings had a bearing on the writings of his songs. The paper calls for a re-engagement of Black spirituals to appreciate how the native Christians used songs to contextualise worship. It concluded by recommending the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe and other mainline churches to deliberate use of the hymns by Black singers to unpack their theology in the African religio-cultural experiences of the colonial era.

**Keywords:** Colonial Hymns; Black Christians; Spirituals; Decoloniality; Rev. Shadrack Ushewokunze.

## Introduction

Over the centuries, "Methodist hymns remained a pivotal expression of the church's heritage and faith informing the identity and the beliefs of Methodism globally. Dark (2024) argues that: Hymns are used to foster connections among the congregants as an expression of the faith, theology, beliefs, and values of the Methodists. They teach and edify the ethics and doctrines of the Methodists, and also serve as mission and evangelism tools...Hymns connect the legacy of Methodist worship and faith. "Since that time hymns were introduced, Methodists have never stopped singing" (Brewu *et al.*, 2024:1). The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe was the result of British Methodist mission activity in the former Southern Rhodesia which began in 1891. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ) used Charles Wesley's hymns since its inception in 1891 up to the 1960s when the Black Christians started to write songs in the vernacular (Gondongwe,



2011:387). This is in spite of the fact that the MCZ English Hymnbook was translated into the Shona language in 1903 given that was and is still the language spoken by the majority of Zimbabweans. The translated hymnbook had sixty songs. “A reprint and addition of hymns was done in 1912, and the same process was repeated in 1957. In 1972 the Shona Hymnbook added several songs including those written by Africans” (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 2015:ii). The 1972 Shona Hymnbook was reprinted twice in the seventies, seven times in the eighties, eight times in the nineties, and five times between 2000 and 2024.

By 2024, MCZ had hymnbooks in seven of the sixteen languages of the country. Each language had a different set of hymns. For example, the English Hymnbook had 823 hymns, Shona 321, Ndebele 418, Tonga 201, Xhosa 407, Kalanga 51, and Nambya 80 hymns. This paper is not concerned about the diversities of the number of hymns in the seven hymnbooks, but special attention will be given to the Shona Hymnbook that contains the spirituals of Reverend Ushewokunze.

The paper defines the key terms and explains the decolonial framework and the methodology that was employed. It also presents the historical background of Reverend Ushewokunze. The decoloniality framework will be applied to discuss the findings of the impact of the Black spirituals in the context of colonial Zimbabwe. Questions such as: to what extent do the hymns of Ushewokunze represent the Black Spirituals in the Methodist Church? What lessons can the MCZ learn from the spirituals by Black Methodist hymn writers? Will be interrogated. The paper concludes by challenging the MCZ to intensify the use of hymns by Black Methodists written during the colonial era as they were a religio-cultural tool to decolonise worship.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### ***Colonial Hymns***

Hymns are reflections of the cultures and the societies that created them as they are expressions of religion (Johnson-Williams & Burnett 2022:85). The above statement suggests that the hymns written by the British people and sung in their colonies were colonial songs as they were sung by the colonisers using their life experiences. Colonial hymns represent different models and beliefs that originated in the Caribbean and were driven by British colonisation from the seventeenth to the twentieth century (Bloechl & Latour, 2019). The type of music was characterised by the synthesis of British folk music with Indigenous, African immigrants that impacted the development of the exceptional musical genres modelling the cultural landscape of the Caribbean Island.

Colonial hymns thus refer to those theological songs written by the colonisers using their stories, events, experiences, legends, and folklore, and yet the songs were used in the colonial territory whose life settings, experiences, and traditions were divorced from that of the composer. Such was the impact of Methodist songs that were brought by the missionaries to Africa.

### ***Working Definition of Black spirituals***

Black spirituals refer to the collections of spiritual songs that started in 1867 in the United States of America (Maultsby, 1976:54). The songs attempted to describe the feelings and thoughts of slaves expressed through songs written in their psychological and cultural interpretations. In the United States, the Black people spiritualised their suffering and exploitation through worship, and this gave birth to the term Black Spirituals (Maultsby, 1976:54). In their slavery, they were intrigued by the Biblical stories which they paralleled to their circumstances, and they started to retell their narratives using Biblical



characters who suffered and how God liberated them. These spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith in the context of their hopelessness and sorrow. Given that, these spirituals were to an extent both radical and revolutionary they were not accepted by the colonisers. They were mostly sorrowful songs as they were memoirs that described the sufferings of the slaves and their identification with Jesus Christ (Library of Congress, n.d). Maultsby (1976:54) highlighted that "the Black people were always banned from singing their songs as they were believed to be idolatrous songs aimed at appeasing some evil spirits." (Maultsby, 1976:54). In this paper, the term 'Black spiritual' will be used to refer to the contextualised hymns that were composed by Reverend Ushewokunze to deal with the theological challenges that the Indigenous Methodists were grappling with as they praised God using colonial hymns.

## **Methodology**

This paper employed qualitative research methodology. Data was collected from the archives of the MCZ. These archives contain the Minutes of Conference with the obituary of Reverend Ushewokunze and his file where some of his presentations and writings were excessed. These files were retrieved with the consent of the MCZ leadership as they are the custodians of the church's intellectual property. Reverend Ushewokunze's family also assisted with the other information from his archives. The family members also aided with the missing information on the personal life of Ushewokunze. Their names were not recorded as individuals to respect their confidentiality.

## **Decolonial Framework**

Decoloniality as a framework was selected to locate the study between coloniality and the need for liberation in worship through hymns. The primary means is via the analytical lens of coloniality in order to examine and reconnoitre the ways colonialism shapes thinking. Thus, individuals need to interrogate coloniality in daily life (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The decoloniality framework considers the universal nature in which oppressive policy impacts the lives of those previously colonised. In this paper, the decolonial framework resonates with the term Black Spirituals as these were not only hymns of the oppressed Blacks, but they were psalms of lamentation that reminiscence how God was involved in the liberation of God's people from slavery and how God can still vindicate them from their colonial masters. Decoloniality framework incorporate concepts and discussions around the issues of sociohistorical, geopolitical, and economic perspectives on gender, race, identities, and relationships (Naidu *et al.*, 2024:54). In this paper, decoloniality will reflect the historical setup of the Black Methodists during the colonial era and how Ushewokunze used the hymns to advocate for the decolonisation of worship. This framework responds to the reason why Ushewokunze composed spirituals that condemned the worship of ancestors and at the same time requested God to intervene in the religious oppression of the Black Christians.

## **The Life History of Reverend Shadrack Ushewokunze**

Reverend Ushewokunze was born to a poor family of Madziva and Hazviyemurre (nee Sadzamare) in 1915 in the Svosve area presently Dhirihori in modern Zimbabwe. Upon his birth, he was named Shadrach, Mugwagwa, Madziva. His family moved closer to Waddilove Institute near Marondera during the 1918-1920 Influenza. The village was named Madziva, and his father became the headman. The relocation closer to Waddilove Institute became the beginning of a new era for Shadrack. His parents were dedicated Christians, but they could not afford to take care of their four boys and two girls. Shadrack was frustrated by not going to school as he could see other children of his age attending school at Waddilove. He convinced himself to disallow his



predicament to define his future. In 1931 he sought work at Waddilove as a Farm labourer to raise school fees. The Agricultural Instructor who was there appreciated his keenness to acquire an education and gave him a job as a stockman and cleaner of the cattle shed (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1980:10).

Driven by his desire to learn, Shadrack became a very loyal young man and was promoted to take charge of the auction gas engine and the generator for electric lighting, a job he held until he secured a bursary to pay his school fees. He attended night school and passed his lower primary classes well. (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1980:11). In 1933 Shadrack was admitted to Standard Three, far past the age of that level of education. He pursued his studies up to Standard Six. The combination of the zeal to learn and maturity made him the best student. His resilience made him appointed the School Captain. After Standard Six, he enrolled in the Teacher's Training Course at the same Institution in 1936. In 1937 Shadrach was appointed to teach at Marshall Hartley Kraal Boarding School in Mashonaland West Province. He was taking special care of the initial intake of boarders. In 1938, he returned to Waddilove as Head of the Practising School. He joined a class for training Local Preachers, and that is when he received his call to become an Evangelist (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1980:10).

Shadrack married Maud the daughter of Evangelist Perry Mugugu in 1941. Their wedding was solemnised by Reverend Matthew Jacha Rusike at Garaipasi Farm in Msengezi Small Scale Farming Area. Shadrack and Maud were blessed with seven children namely Gertrude Rufaro a retired State Registered Nurse, Christopher who was a Barrister at law, former Secretary for the Ministry of Mines then Chief Executive Officer at the Zimbabwe Development Corporation College, and later Minister of Trade and Commerce, Flora Shingai, a Degree holder in Social Work, Onward Chatambudza, Diesel Motor Mechanic, Rumbidzai Patricia a Health Services Administrator, Unesu Hilda Obatolu Retired Chief Director of Veterinary Services and Zimbabwe's first female veterinarian and lastly Rungano, a Mathematician and retired Meteorologist.

In 1945 Reverend Ushewokunze moved to Chibero Circuit as an accepted Candidate for ministry. In 1947 and 1948 he started training as an itinerant minister (full-time minister) at Waddilove Training Institute. Between 1949 and 1952, he was stationed in the Mhumhurwi circuit where the family was blessed with a baby girl whom they named Rumbidzai (Praise) because he had obtained a Certificate in Theology that qualified him to be a Tutor at Epworth Theological College now United Theological College. He returned to Waddilove in 1953 as an Assistant Tutor at the Theological College working with Reverend Robert Forshaw who had a Master of Theology Degree (Gondongwe, 2011: 96). Although Ushewokunze was appointed after Reverend Enock Musa who had been deployed as a lecturer for the evangelists, the latter's appointment was unique because he was teaching those training for itinerant ministry (Gondongwe, 2011: 96).

When the Theological College was relocated to Epworth near Harare in 1954, Ushewokunze continued to serve with distinction for seven years. He was given the work to supervise all pastoral work together with Reverend Chisa. The work included supervising students who were working at Rodis and Epworth quarry. They did pastoral visitations and evangelical campaigns (Epworth Theological College, 1959:3). During this period, Ushewokunze was sent to Wesley College in Bristol in the United Kingdom, representing the College from 1957 to 1960.

In 1961 he became the first African Minister to be appointed to a European Circuit called Salisbury Trinity Circuit. He served at Trinity Circuit up to 1965. He was responsible for the establishment of several African Societies. He was elected the first Area Chairperson (now District Bishop) of the Salisbury (Harare) Area Council in 1963 and held the office for five years. He was transferred



to Makwiro Circuit from 1966-1968 where he also continued to serve as the Area Chairperson. In 1969 he was appointed Chaplain to the students at Waddilove Institute.

A dark cloud befell him in March 1972 when he lost his beloved wife Maud who had served beside him for 31 years. The grieving process affected his health. One of his daughters narrated: "In no time, father suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered, despite his partial paralysis, he displayed great determination to continue his witness for his Lord." Reverend Ushewokunze became supernumerary in 1972 because of ill health. He relocated to his plot in Seke Township - Chitungwiza not far from Harare. He passed on, on 15 October 1979, in about the 64<sup>th</sup> year of his age and the 31<sup>st</sup> year of his ministry, and was buried near his home in Chitungwiza.

### **Context of Reverend Ushewokunze's Spirituals**

Reverend Ushewokunze was born, bred, and died during the colonial era. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Africa suffered the effects of colonialism, commerce, and Christianisation. The colonisers exploited the rich heritage of African resources resulting in the institutionalisation of colonial rule that disrupted the existing social structures of Africa (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012:46). The colonisers also imposed new cultural concepts that saw the deculturation of Africa. From the Christian side, the missionaries introduced mission stations which were one way for Africans to be under mission Christianity's influence. "Missions were no accidental creations but missionary authority to deculturate the Africans". (Mujinga, 2017:120). Life in the mission was not just an ordinary life, but an orderly life (Duncan, 2003:23). For Graham Duncan:

Mission life came easily for those who had endured disruption already in their lives. Missionaries were skilled at identifying groups who were due to a variety of adverse circumstances and ripe for conversion. They were also skilled in the process of resocialization of prospective converts removed from their society and sheltered paternalistically in the mission complex which may include a school, a hospital, and an orphanage, they received intensive re-education. The mission station therefore occupied a critical interstice in the colonial encounter in which Africans could better understand the material and intellectual consequences of colonial expansion. (Duncan, 2003:23)

The fact is that Ushewokunze received transformation on the mission farm, and there is overwhelming evidence that it also resocialised him and influenced his understanding of life. He had face-to-face experiences with the missionaries, and he sang the colonial hymns at every service that he attended because "English hymns perfected the Methodist Church's ideology when it spread to other parts of the world." (Brewu *et al.*, 2024:1). Given that missionary life was imposed on African converts, it can be argued that the proselyted Africans accepted it as an honour to live and they embraced the new values, languages, and religious systems.

Christianity was a weapon to pacify African Christians. It taught them to accept poverty with humility, to embrace deculturation graciously, to live a life of meekness innocently, to forgive ungrudgingly, to sacrifice life for the mission without counting the cost, and to consent to mission life with pride. Ushewokunze was a product of the mission life and missionary orientation. For example, in his letter to the District Chairperson (now Presiding Bishop) Reverend Andrew Ndhlela on 29 January 1974 requesting money to build his retirement home, in Seke Township, he wrote, "As you know that I have worked for the church with distinction but in real terms for nothing, would you be kind enough to give me a grant of \$1000.00 to build a home for myself and my family" (Gondongwe, 2011:126). The District Chairperson's response was: "The church could



only give you your pension and is not in a position to build a house for you as the church had no such policy” ” (Gondongwe, 2011:126).

Missionary life also forced many African ministers to be divided between the new faith that had given them the prestige of education and the religion that defined who they were. The confrontation between the Whites and the Indigenous people demonstrated an irreconcilable relationship. This challenge did not spare the disputes in the church given that the White people were the same as the colonialists or missionaries while the Black people were the same people who hated the Whites. Apart from the tension of pigmentation, the missionaries discouraged the appeasing of ancestors which was an African culture (Nkomazana 2016). They condemned the African culture as syncretic, and barbaric. The ceremony was considered unbiblical although some African ministers consulted traditional healers. The report made by Reverend Simon Chiota to the Methodist Committee on Customs and Beliefs on 2 February 1948 stated that: “all African ministers were engaging in ancestor worship except ‘him and a few others’ (Gondongwe, 2011: 170). Gondongwe (2011:170) opines that “ If the phrase ‘few other’ is not used figuratively, it means that by 1948, when there were nineteen serving Indigenous Methodist ministers only three desisted from ancestor worship, sixteen continued to observe these rituals because of fear”.

According to his Obituary, Reverend Ushewokunze was deeply interested in the Shona language and served on committees for the revision of the Shona Bible, and the preparation of the new Shona Hymn Book of the Methodist Church (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 1980:11). One of his daughters, said, “*baba* (father) had always been composing hymns and as his children, we made good testing ground for the songs. He had a few more uncomplete hymns before his death, ‘My love for music started there. The daughter further narrated that:

[H]e always insisted on the purity of spoken Shona language. He was also good at interpreting Shona culture and some lyrics and tunes of his hymns are set in traditional scenes. In February the year of his death, he had produced four more hymns: such was his desire to see Jesus honoured. He could not wait for a day when a mbira (traditional) instrument could be respected and valued in the Methodist church. He believed in herbal medicine (the natural source of the majority of contemporary drugs and to cure illnesses). These medicines served him as he grew up and he knew many of them.

### **The Methodist Church Hymnbook**

Hymns formed the faith of the early Methodists. The first volume produced by John and Charles Wesley had 6,500 hymns (Hopper, 2014). Frank Baker estimated Charles’ total output of nearly 9,000 poems (Baker, 1962:x). John also composed hymns and by 1737, he had already published *A Collection of Hymns and Psalms* for use by the American Colonies which became the first Methodist hymnal (Hopper, 2014). For John Wesley, the production of hymns was important because, “first, it was suitable to replace many hymns already in circulation so it became the only volume needed by members of the Methodist Societies and should be affordable” (Hopper, 2014). Second, the *Collection* was to become a comprehensive body of doctrine for teaching, exhorting, and encouraging Methodist Societies (Hopper, 2014). Wesley retorted that, the *Collection* is large enough to contain all the important facts of the Methodist sacred religion, whether speculative or practical; to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and reason (Hopper, 2014). The origins of the Methodist hymnbook expressed how valuable and sacred hymns are. The MCZ Shona hymnbook is a product of this rich tradition (Muranda & Banda, 2023:42).



## The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe Hymnbook

The hymnbook is divided into two sections of songs and prayers which is why it is called *Nziyo dze Methodist ne Minamoto* (Lit. Songs of the Methodist and Prayers.) The first pages contain the history of the Shona Hymnbook from 1903. The 321 hymns are divided into twenty-nine thematic areas. From 1-12, are praises of God the Father, 13-27 praises of Jesus, his birth narratives come next 28-43, his life and teaching, 44-49, suffering and death 50-60, his resurrection 61-73, and his Kingship 74-76. The hymns about the Holy Spirit start from hymns 77-84 while Trinity is 85-86. Holy Scriptures 87-92, and hymns inviting sinners are from 93-107. Other sections also include forgiveness, repentance, praise and worship, love and fellowship in God, trials and temptations, faith and peace, prayer, growing in spirit, travelling mercies, death, judgment, and eschatology, among others.

Ushewokunze wrote ten hymns that fall into the categories of life and teaching (hymn 46), the Kingship of Jesus (hymn 75), revival (hymn 130), death, judgment, and the life to come (hymns 197 and 198), Sunday worship (219), infant baptism (236), the church's fight and conquering of the evil (hymn 253), life for generations (hymn 257) and weddings. These songs remain critical for the Methodist Church today because the hymnbook constitutes a form of religion lived in public (Kloppers, 2020:1).

## Discussion on Reverend Ushewokunze's Spirituals

In this paper, the hymns written by Ushewokunze are listed alphabetically and not the schedule of how they were written or their theological meaning. In theologising these spirituals, the author will not elaborate on the songs in the same way as some are motivational songs. More emphasis will be put on those who qualify to be spirituals of decoloniality.

*Baba Tinotenda* (Father we are thankful) hymn 279

### **Original hymn**

*Baba ndinotenda  
Nezvipo zvenyu  
Miti namaruva  
Mhuka neshiri*

*Chorus  
Tidzidzisei, She  
Kuva netsitsi  
Kuzvisikwa zvose  
Zviri panyika*

*Mhuka dzokurima  
Nokutakura  
Dzimwe dzinochengeta  
Isu mumisha*

*Neshiri dzedenga  
Dzinoimbisa  
Dzinorwisa mhandu  
Dzedu muminda*

### **Literary translation**

Father we are grateful  
For all the gifts  
Trees and flowers  
Animals and birds

*Chorus  
Teach us, Lord  
To be merciful  
To all the creation  
In this world*

Animals and plants  
Even to carry  
Some animals that give us security.  
In our homes

The birds of the air  
That sing  
To fight the enemy.  
In our fields

In this hymn, Ushewokunze was thanking God for all of the creation. The Eco-theological chorus requests God to teach humanity to take care of this creation. The hymn also thanks God for



domestic animals including dogs that guard the machinery, and birds of the air that sing melodious songs to scare some predators in the field. This spiritual was written when most of the Black people had lost their livestock to the controlling colonisers. Unfortunately, it was not easy for them to reclaim the animals which were now in the hands of the alien minority.

*In Izwi rashe rakasvika*, (The World of the Lord arrived) hymn 253, Ushewokunze focuses on the repentance of Africans as a continuous process.

*Izwi rashe rakasvika  
Semhodzi ndukunduku  
Yakamera pavhu raShe  
Mhodzi youkururama*

The Word of the Lord arrived.  
Like a small seed  
germinated on the soil of the King.  
The seed of righteousness

Chorus

Chorus

*Ngaikure Tenzi wangu  
Nesimba neupenyu  
Ikuririre miti yose  
Mhodzi youkururama*

Let it grow my King.  
With power and life  
That it surpasses all the trees.  
The seed of righteousness

*Izwi raShe rakamera  
Semhodzi m'nyika ino  
Rakaita muti waShe  
Chechi yomununuri*

The Word of the Lord germinated.  
Like a small seed  
It became the Lord's tree.  
The Church of the Saviour

*Izwi rashe rinofusa  
Masimba echarima  
Samasimba emidzimu  
Anetsa vana vaShe*

The Word of God fight  
Like the powers of the darkness  
Like the powers of the ancestors  
That is troubling Lord's children.

*Anobvuma izwi raShe  
Angave nemufaro  
Rinofusa chakaipa  
Rinopa mweya mutsva*

Anyone who believes in the Word.  
Will have joy.  
It defeats all evils.  
The renews the Spirit.

In this spiritual, Ushewokunze narrated how the Word of God was propagated in Africa. For him, the Gospel is a product of God because the Word is God. He also emphasised how the Word of God can fight all evil spirits. He assures the Black people that the Word of God is righteousness and has powers to dispel evil spirits like the ancestral spirits. As a spiritual composed by a Black minister, the Methodist Church found a compounded meaning in the song that at one time it was a musical competition piece.

*Imi makamboburuka* (Lord you once descended) in hymn 257 Ushewokunze explains how Jesus descended on earth, and the whole theology of incarnation and liberation is expressed in this hymn. God intends to liberate humanity and give them a new Spirit. He also expressed how the blood of Jesus was a ransom for humanity.

Stanza 4.

*Ishe tungamirai nyika  
Kuti inange kwamuri  
Ichiita kuda kwenyu  
Ndimi Ishe mungaiteri*

Lord lead our country  
That it will be directed to you.  
Let your will be done.  
You are the Lord who is always God.





In the above stanza, Ushewokunze was lamenting for a country that was at the centre of war, where many innocent people were killed, and yet the church was not condemning these brutal killings. He saw the country divided between the Whites and the Black people, with superiority and inferiority, masters and slaves, governing the relationship resulting in the country having lost direction. As a Black Methodist minister, Ushewokunze bemoaned his people who remained slaves in their country but without any power to rescue themselves. In his powerlessness, he ends the stanza by saying, "You are the Lord who is always God." This is a statement of surrendering and allowing God to act. The spiritual expresses the deep struggle of the Black people under the double oppression of political and religious subjugation.

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|----|--|---|
| 5. | <i>Ishe dzimai kubayana</i><br><i>Kusina chakunotipa</i><br><i>Kunopunza Misha</i><br><i>Ndimi Ishe mungaiteri</i> | Lord remove our painful fighting<br>That does not add value to us.<br>That only destroys families.<br>You are the Lord who is always God. |
|----|--|---|

In this stanza, Ushewokunze appealed to God to intervene and stop these painful killings of the Black people. The word *kubayana* shows that the killings were done using sharp objects. For Ushewokunze, this ruthless murder of Black people does not yield any results but can only destroy families.

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 6. | <i>Mirai nesu Changamire</i><br><i>Tisamira tega</i><br><i>Munoziva shumba yedu</i><br><i>Ndimi Ishe mungaiteri</i> | Stand with us our King<br>We cannot stand alone.<br>You know our lion (powerful enemy)<br>You are the Lord who is always God. |
|----|---|---|

In the last stanza, he interceded for the Black people asking God to intervene. He admitted that Black people cannot stand alone because their enemy is too powerful.

*In Jesu ndiye nzira youyedu* (Jesus is our way) hymn 197, the minister was challenging ancestral worship. As an African minister, ancestral worship was part of his identity. African ministers were swinging between the existing faith and the new faith as elaborated earlier. In 1977, Ushewokunze presented a paper on African customs and beliefs. In this paper, he expressed the hypothesis of "bringing back" *kurova guva* amongst the Shona people. He highlighted that:

Let it be known that when a Christian engages in a *kurova guva* ritual he or she imprisons his or her soul in a grave that does not have Jesus and consequently no salvation... We all know the wonderful job that the church did at the funeral of my wife. When the time came that her parents should do the African necessities for her, they performed the *kurova guva* ritual, but I said to myself do as it pleases you, but the answer shall come from God. They asked me to bring a cow, a goat, and a Black chicken which I did. I also had to pay another cow for remarrying before the *kurova guva* ritual was performed...sometime during the middle of the night, I saw a vision of a chicken suspended in the air when I got near to see the chicken drop to the ground, and I discovered that it was that chicken that I had given at the *kurova guva* ritual of my late wife. Near the chicken was the cow that I had paid also. Similarly, the goat was there and to me, the vision was telling me that all those things could not go to God, but they belong to this earth, so they were not supposed to have been paid in the first place. (Ushewokunze, 1977:1)



He insisted that *kurova guva* resembles the weak faith and uncleanliness of the deceased. He wrapped his presentation by challenging his hearers, “Who are you to disregard what God has cleaned and want to clean it through our customs and beliefs? Let everyone who is doing it, be it African clergy or laity, repent. (Ushewokunze, 1977:1).

*Makati vana vaduku ngavauiswe* (You once said let the children come to me), hymn 236. was derived from (Matthew 19:13-14) where Jesus blessed children whom the people denied access to God. This was a hymn to give space to children because as evidenced by his children’s education, these innocent souls were a priority in his life as a minister.

*Makati zvose siyai* (You said leave everything) hymn 130 addresses the teachings of Jesus in (Matthew 19:27-29) where Peter said, “We have left everything and followed you”. The spiritual reminds people that the cost of discipleship means leaving everything and following Jesus. He encouraged people to take their hearts and power and use them for the glory of God. He also requests God to teach his people to be his witnesses and help those who are weak.

*Ndimi baba makasikwa zvepari* (It is you Lord you created everything in the world) is hymn 75. The hymn acknowledges that God created everything on earth, the heavens, tribes, seas, and all creatures that live there, kings and kingdoms, churches, and the Word that is preached in these churches. God also sent Jesus on earth and all knees should bow before him. This is a spiritual that gives honour and praise to God. Since Ushewokunze loved herbal medicine as confessed by one of his daughters, it cannot be denied that he wrote the hymn 75 *Ndimi baba makasikwa zvepari* to justify the use of herbs for healing.

*Nokuchema kwandiinako* (With the crying I have) is hymn 198. This is a spiritual that demonstrates the intersection of Ushewokunze’s Christian and African life that he wrote in 1971. In this spiritual, Ushewokunze made use of the lyrics and some of the words of famous African religious songs (Gondongwe, 2011: 214).

*Nokusungwa kwandinako*  
*Ngozi yandiinayo ichakundwa*  
*Zvandarindira*  
*Mwana wepfumo jena achauya*  
*Nhasi muvengi wangi achaona*

with the bondage I am in  
My avenging spirit will be defeated.  
As wait patiently.  
The son of the king will come.  
My enemy will be defeated.

*Nokusungwa kwandiinako*  
*Gasho romwoyo wangu richachekwa*  
*Zvandarindira*  
*Jesu wokumatenga achauya*  
*Yose misungo achaidimura*

With the bondage I am in  
The rope of my heart shall be cut  
As wait patiently.  
Jesus of the heavens shall come.  
All the cords, he shall break.

*Norufaro rwenyika into*  
*Nyika yamuona ichatongwa*  
*Musi unenge*  
*Mwana wepfumo jena ava pano*  
*Zvose zvamunovona zvichapera*

With all the joy of this world  
This world shall be judged.  
On that day  
The son of the king will be here.  
All that you see shall vanish.

*Noupfumi hwenyika ino,*  
*Nhaka yenyika ino ichapera*  
*Musi unenge*  
*Mwana wokumatenga ava pano*  
*Zvose zvamunona zvichapera*

With all the riches that you see.  
The inheritance of this world shall end  
On that day  
Jesus of heaven will come  
All that you see shall vanish.

*Nomutongi wenyika ino*

The ruler of this world



*Mambo wenyika ino achatongwa*  
*Musi unenge*  
*Mwana wekumatenga avapano*  
*Jinda renyika ino richachema*

The king of this world will be judged.  
On that day  
The son of the Heavens is here.  
The king of this world will cry.

In this spiritual, Ushewokunze also mentions the role of avenging spirits which were not existent in missionary Christianity, and yet for the Black Christians, these were a reality of life that could haunt individuals unless they were protected by their ancestors. This spiritual, positions Africans in their real context of hymns not songs like *Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound* which was sung in the context of the luxurious European milieu. Ushewokunze was convinced that although Black Christians were torn between the new and old faiths, the avenging spirit would be defeated by Jesus if people prayed fervently. He referred to Jesus as the Son of the King who would come to conquer the evil spirits. The first stanza centres on the quest for decoloniality of worship by Africans using their Indigenous knowledge systems and African epistemology.

#### Hymn 219

*Zvose zvinhu tinopa zvedu*  
*Kuna Jehovha*  
*Chiripo chimwe chatiisina*  
*Kupa Jehova*

Everything we give.  
To Jehovah  
There is one thing we did not.  
Give to Jehovah

*Chorus*  
*Kunzi moyo yedu yose*  
*Tipire kuna Ishe*  
*Usipo moyo hazvikwane*  
*Kuna Jehova*

To say all the heart.  
To be given to the Lord.  
Without the heart it is not enough.  
To the Lord

*Moyo wako ngaude Ishe*  
*Mwari Jehovah*  
*Iye wakaisvoda isu*  
*Tisingazive*

Your heart must love the Lord.  
God Jehovah  
He who loved us.  
When we did not know.

*Hama dzose dzinoda rudo*  
*Rwatakapiwa*  
*Pfuudza kunavo vasina*  
*Mweya wokupa*

Our relative needs love  
That we were given.  
Send to those who do not have  
the spirit to give.

This is a song sung during Sunday Offering. It was written to reflect on the system that was used by the missionaries to discourage Black people from giving offerings. Ushewokunze was explicit that giving is a combination of a willing heart and what to give. "It is important to offer what we have but more importantly, to offer our hearts." The hymn also encourages the giving of the poor. This song is also sung beyond the boundaries of MCZ and Zimbabwe. For example, the Good Samaritan United Methodist in Addison Illinois in the United States of America once also used the hymn in their worship. When they sang the song, Gladys the wife of Onward Ushewokunze (who had been in the choir in Chitungwiza while Reverend Ushewokunze first wrote the song in the 1970s), said, "The Reverend Shadrack Ushewokunze wrote this song, and it was published in a hymnal of the MCZ. After translating the song to the congregants, Gladys concluded by saying, "It was an honour to sing this song. To God be the glory" (YouTube, 2012). The YouTube channel of this song had 1,875 comments by 12 October 2024. One person who commented said, 'This is a powerful song it reminds me of the MCZ. Another one wrote, 'I would almost cry listening to this song each time the choir sang it. *Inokomborera* (it blesses me) (YouTube, 2012).



## Findings

The hymns sung by Ushewokunze address several issues that would have been crucial during those days as well as in the current world. Whereas some would squarely qualify as spirituals advocating for decoloniality, others focus on different themes. For example, Hymn 279 advocates for ecojustice. Given that Ushewokunze loved African culture and herbs, this hymn might have been influenced by his love for nature which was one of the missio-cultural confrontations between the missionaries and the locals as the former viewed this as animists. It can be argued that this song was a spiritual that calls for decoloniality of worship, first in defence of creation and second in appreciating the creation as friends of humanity with trees and flowers being sources of medicine in the context of hospitals and clinics which were not user-friendly to the African life.

In his narration of how the gospel came to Africa in Hymn 253, Ushewokunze was demystifying the notion that it was the missionaries who brought the good news to Africa. The song was sung in the context of intensive ancestral worship. He encouraged his fellow ministers to have faith in the Word of God because anyone who believes in the Word will have joy, and his/her spirit will be renewed. Since the church was under missionary leadership for a long time, it cannot be denied that Ushewokunze received their support on this song given that they wanted a “religiously upright” society. The other probable justification of his support from the missionaries is seen in the inclusion of his songs in the MCZ hymnbook as far as 1972 when missionary domination was defining the church of the day. Although the church was under the Black leadership of Reverend Andrew Ndhlela from 1964, the process of decolonising traditional missionary songs was a big decision difficult to implement without the support from the missionaries.

This paper also finds out that, as a Shona-loving minister, Ushewokunze used his spirituals to stand between the missionaries who discouraged Africans from following their ancestors and the Black people who were struggling to balance Christianity and culture. As a decolonial spiritual, the hymn *The Word of the Lord Arrived (253)* does not give room to a borrowed Jesus who was transported and transplanted by the missionaries, but a God who tabernacled in Africa in the person Jesus, whose liberation history is anchored in Africa. For this reason, Black ministers had no reason to be syncretic because the Word of God was not a borrowed phenomenon in Africa.

In the same song, Ushewokunze refers to the enemy as a lion. “*Munoziva Shumba yedu.*” In (Genesis 49:9-10), the lion represents kingship taking over the land of other kingdoms by force. This was exactly what the colonialists had done. Ushewokunze might have an imagination of a lion mentioned in (Proverbs 28:15) which represents evil, or (1 Peter 5:8) where the lion represents Satan. In inviting God to fight the lion, this spiritual is reminiscent of (Revelation 19:16) where a lion is the king of kings, a roaring lion taking vengeance over its enemies. This is the lion presented by (Isaiah 53:7) to represent Jesus the conquering King. This spiritual addressed the political environment of the day where the locals had to rely on eschatological faith to survive their ordeal. Simply put, the liberation struggle made the Africans lose hope and pushed their hopelessness to God to intervene on their side. They viewed their enemy as more powerful than them and that only God could conquer that monster. This can be argued to be what Ushewokunze meant by “you know our lion”. For an African minister, speaking truth to power was a tough stance that a Black person would take, during the colonial era, and inviting God to intervene represents the deep faith of the Africans.

The paper further revealed that the spirituals of Ushewokunze condemn the deep African traditions. In Hymn 197, he stresses that Jesus is the way to heaven. He is the only one who can take us to heaven. He addresses the challenges of death which the Africans believed was caused by some forces or individuals. His spirituals, decolonise that traditional mentality of causative death which Africans strongly believe. He emphasised that death only comes according to God’s plan. No one can escape death because our life is short, and everyone will die. All those who



receive Jesus have no trouble, death for them is a promotion to their Maker. In decolonising the philosophy of death, he confessed that death is the gate to heaven, and everyone must be prepared. People have to receive Jesus as their saviour. Given that Ushewokunze lost his wife and started to process grief, it can be argued that he wrote the spiritual during his grief period. In the pain of losing his beloved one, he came to realise that death is a reality contrary to African philosophy where death is caused or can be suspended. Everyone will die because this world is not our home. This spiritual was sung by someone who had been in pain of loss but had recovered and was now facing the reality of life.

Stephenson (1985: iv) alludes that, "African music is a point of contact between the church and culture, accelerating cultural liberation". In naming his spiritual *Nokuchema Kwandiinako*, Ushewokunze appreciated that being a Black Christian during the colonial period was a deep sacrifice and a loss of African identity. Black Christians found themselves in the bondage of missionary Christianity that was clothed in the Eurocentric regalia and yet the African culture demanded the Black ministers to participate fully in their African rituals. In this spiritual, he continues to mention the impact of the "rope tying" African Christians of avenging spirit, and Jesus' power to destroy the spirit of darkness. Jesus is the King of Heaven, the Ruler, Son of the Heaven who is always present. Ushewokunze sang eschatologically especially as he said, '*With all the riches that you see, the inheritance of this world shall end, on that day, Jesus of heaven will come, all that you see shall vanish.*' This spiritual grapples with centering the African problems in the divine plan of God. He concludes his spiritual by encouraging the Black Christians to repent because 'the King of Heaven is here.' As a Black Christian raised in a poor family, one who believed in the Shona language and culture, the King of Heaven would not be a White Jesus, but one who understands African life because in his infancy Jesus found hospitality in Africa the same way he was assisted by an Africans to carry his cross. The King in the lyrics of Ushewokunze does not condemn African culture because as a human being, Jesus was raised and died in a culture. This spiritual therefore encourages the Black people to maintain a balance between Christianity and African culture as a way to re-enculturate the abandoned culture.

## Conclusion

The colonial hymns and Black spirituals remain critical in the decolonisation process of theology. Reverend Ushewokunze's spirituals decolonise theology from the side of the oppressed. As he was challenged by the coloniality of theology, he was also confronting African culture that needed decolonisation. In this qualitative research, decolonial theory has proved to be central in the spirituals of Reverend Ushewokunze. Unfortunately, out of his ten spirituals, only five are common with *Zvose zvinhu* being sung by most churches every Sunday during the offering time. The song decolonises the African mentality of pretending to be beggars so they do not give. Lastly, Hymns were deeply engrained in theology that Methodists became emotionally attached to, and congregants would sing them in their homes at devotions, in services, and even on the streets Ushewokunze took advantage of this position to advocate for a double decoloniality of the coloniser and the colonised.

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