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John Chilembwe's Praxis: A Harbinger for Malawi's Public Theology

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Abstract

This study discusses the phenomenon of John Chilembwe's praxis as a harbinger for the construction of public theology in Malawi. It articulates an apocalyptic, soteriological, ecclesiological, and missional vision in which the church is understood as a socio-political entity in its own right, inaugurated by Christ to publicly exemplify and perform the eschatological new reality of God's reign here on earth. Qualitative research methods: literature review and historical research were employed. The study established ten findings regarding Chilembwe's praxis approach: (1) establishing schools, (2) promoting human dignity for all, (3) promoting African land rights, (4) fighting the evils of labour tenancy (*thangata* system) and taxation, (5) protesting against the involvement of Africans in the First World War, (6) organising the 1915 uprising against the colonial rule which inspired African nationalism that eventually led to the independence of African nations, (7) promoting women's empowerment, (8) creating an egalitarian society, (9) experimenting with various agricultural initiatives, and (10) using violence to counteract colonialism. In recognition of his visionary, transformational, and servant leadership, the Malawi government declared 15 January as the Chilembwe Day. Also, his portrait was on all Malawi Kwacha notes from 1997 to 2012. Also, the K2000 note has his portrait. Therefore, the study argues that a retrieval of John Chilembwe's religio-political engagement provides lessons for the task of constructing African public theology. This task entails an articulation of a model of ecclesial political engagement in which the church in Africa demonstrates its own identity and mission as the proclamation

and performance of a new order of God's reign inaugurated in Christ's death and resurrection. The study has three implications: (1) the explication of the fundamental public contents of the Christian faith drawn from scripture and tradition, (2) the demonstration of Christianity's public relevance and reasonableness, and (3) an examination and exposition of Christianity's public meaning, significance, and impact on society.

Introduction

This article aims to engage with John Chilembwe's praxis as a harbinger for the construction of public theology in Malawi in view of the emerging interest in theology and public life in Malawi (Ross 2018) and Africa as a whole (Agang, Forster, and Jenkins 2020). John Chilembwe was a visionary leader, a man ahead of his times, whose religio-political engagement with the public sphere informs the discourse on public theology in Malawi. His praxis method of theological reflection and engagement inexorably produced a public presence, influence, and consequences. In this way, he made connections between his Christian faith and the practical issues facing the society (Crane 2011:1). John Chilembwe was concerned with the public relevance of Christian theology. Thus, he constructed a public theology in order to engage with the spiritual, socio-economic, political, and cultural issues of the day, thereby bringing a coherent Christian perspective to bear upon public policy and all spheres of life (De Villiers 2011:9).

Mbiti highlights the significance of religion in the African public sphere of human existence and social life which provides an opportunity for the construction of an African public theology:

Africans are notoriously religious. Wherever the African is, there is religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party, or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (1990:1)

In this chapter, African public theology is defined as

a Christian theology that is concerned with how all aspects of human knowledge, understanding and faith in God can translate into a deep moral commitment to building a better society, one which is strong in faith, love, justice and wisdom (Agang, Forster, and Jenkins 2020:8)

Kusmierz and Cochrane (2013:49) identifies John Chilembwe's praxis with a critical engagement of the prevailing religio-cultural and socio-political issues in the public domain from a theological point of view. And, as a minister of the gospel, he had to be a voice of the voiceless, the main target of public theology (Kaunda 2015:29-31). John Chilembwe's praxis further exemplifies an African public theology that is prophetic in nature (Pieterse 2013:1-6). Kim (2013:7) mentions several features of public theology which are apparent in Chilembwe's praxis such as critiquing, opposing, resisting the social injustice and promoting justice in society.

In pursuit of the aim of the study, the article engages with John Chilembwe's praxis as a harbinger of African public theology in four ways. These are: (1) John Chilembwe's education and formation, (2) John Chilembwe's praxis, (3) the 1915 Chilembwe uprising, and (4) John Chilembwe as a harbinger for African public theology.

John Chilembwe's Education and Formation as an African Public Theologian

In this section of the paper, I will present a discussion on John Chilembwe's education and formation as an African public theologian.

Shepperson and Price (2000:40) relate that John Chilembwe's upbringing in his home district of Chiradzulo contributed to his formation as an African public theologian in several ways. First, the socio-political context of his childhood days was characterised by warmongering, slavery, and a prevailing atmosphere of insecurity. Second, the Ngoni warriors had fought and prevailed among the Lomwe and Mang'anja tribes who were the inhabitants of Chiradzulo. The Ngoni people ruthlessly fought and killed the other tribes and

most of them sought refuge in the slopes of the Mulanje mountain. Third, the Yao slave raiders often targeted the Magomelo area in Chiradzulo to catch slaves who were sold to the Arab slave traders. Fourth, the Portuguese who had partitioned Mozambique were also interested in the area because of its strategic positioning as well as the abundance of ivory which was in high demand at that time. Fifth, the prevailing insecurity of the region led some chiefs to sign protection treaties with the British, eventually coming under the British Protectorate. Nevertheless, little did they know that the treaties they had signed meant that they would be paying taxes to the British Protectorate administration, a restriction of the local autonomy of the chiefs, and that the Europeans would be given access to own land which was once under customary administration (Kirk, Waller, and Lloyd 1895:215). Ross (2020:18) intimates that the 1915 Chilembwe uprising was motivated by the desire to resolve some of the issues that Chilembwe encountered during his childhood days and had continued without any hope of the situation changing for the better on behalf of the Africans. Thus, Chilembwe endeavoured to interpret his Christian faith and translate it into practice by addressing the prevailing socio-political issues in the public sphere. In so doing, he can be considered as a harbinger of African public theology (De Villiers 2011:9).

Ross (2020:189) notes that Chilembwe studied in one of the Church of Scotland mission schools in Chilomoni, Blantyre, from around 1890. Hauya (1993:22) writes that John Chilembwe's education was a product of early Christian missionary initiatives in Nyasaland which had a twofold purpose: first, civilising the primitive and pagan natives by teaching them Christian values; second, replacing the slave trade with legitimate commerce. The curriculum of the mission schools comprised of reading, writing, and arithmetic, with some missions placing emphasis on technical skills. Amanze (2009:121) argues that missionary education was an instrument of Christian evangelism for converting the indigenous people groups. Nevertheless, the missionary education prepared John Chilembwe to become an African public theologian in three ways. First, he was able to read the Bible and construct an early indigenous liberation theology (Ross 2020:189). Second, missionary education prepared Chilembwe to be an interpreter of missionaries and thus allowed him to engage with the Western missiological and ideological discourses (Shepperson and Price 2000:55). Third, the missionary education gave Chilembwe literacy skills which enabled him to write both in the vernacular languages and English.

He later used his literacy skills to write a protest letter against the colonial authorities concerning the First World War in 1914 (Ross 2020:247-249).

Joseph Booth's Influence on John Chilembwe

Shepperson and Price (2000:37) observe that Chilembwe was employed as a house servant by Joseph Booth in 1892. Joseph Booth arrived in Africa in 1892 and established the Zambezi Industrial Mission near Blantyre. He criticised the reluctance of Scottish Presbyterian missions to admit Africans as full church members. Later, he founded seven different independent missions in Nyasaland which championed the equality of all worshippers. Fiedler (2016:5-6) argues that from Chilembwe's association with Booth, he learnt a radical religious ideology and an egalitarian vision. For instance, Booth's 'Africa for the African' philosophy was crucial in Chilembwe's formation as an African public theologian due to its liberational predisposition for the African continent (Kavaloh 1991:12).

Fiedler (2016:5) argues that Joseph Booth mentored Chilembwe to become an African public theologian by inculcating an 'Africa for the African' vision into his life. According to Ross and Fiedler (2020), Joseph Booth's 'Africa for the African' vision was embedded with independency, sovereignty, and self-determination for Africa. This can be demonstrated in several ways. First, he wondered why Africa which was bigger than Europe and North America didn't belong anymore to the African race. Second, he questioned why the Africans' rights for self-administration, sovereignty, and development were trivialised and truncated. Third, he protested against all people and nations who ruthlessly asserted their purpose, power, or right to dispose Africans of their God-given land and natural resources. Fourth, he expressed confidence in the intellectual capabilities and physical strength of Africans which established the basis for human equality. In other words, Africans were not lesser human beings as compared to the Europeans and Americans. Fifth, he expressed confidence in the significance of Africa's population in relation to the continent's vastness and wealth. Sixth, he wondered why Africans were being dehumanised through slave trade and were not treated with human dignity. Seventh, he criticised the Europeans for being responsible for retarding Africa's progress and development due to the criminal treatment they administered to Africa. This was influenced by the European background of barbarism, commercial and territorial enterprise, invasion, and appropriation

of other territories, subduing and destroying the indigenous inhabitants, plundering Africa's human resources through slavery which was one of the most gigantic and long sustained crimes in history. Eighth, he criticised the partition, plunder or scramble for Africa which was characterised by the invasion, annexation, division, and colonisation of Africa by western European powers during a historical era commonly called 'New Imperialism' (1833-1914) (Pakenham 2015:8). Ninth, he considered the partition of Africa as a daylight robbery which drained Africa's wealth for Europe's benefit and development. Tenth, he defended the character of the African which was misrepresented by European prejudice. He argued that the African is not a lazy man, is not a dishonest man, is not a stupid man, is not a quarrelsome man, but acts honestly (Booth 1996:12). Thus, Joseph Booth transferred this liberational, revolutionary, and transformational vision to John Chilembwe and this undoubtedly played a crucial role in his formation as an African public theologian (Thompson 2017:55).

Ross (2020:241) opines that Joseph Booth's threefold strategy for the upliftment of the African race serves as a precursor for the construction and praxis of an early African public theology in three ways: first, by spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the African continent; second, by the restoration of land of Africa to the African people; third, by the restoration of the Negroes to their motherland from where they were stolen, i.e. if they are willing to return back (Booth 1996:13). Crane (2011:1) argues that Booth's strategy connects the gospel of Jesus Christ to resolving the social ills prevalent at that time and constitutes an early construction and praxis of African public theology. Thus, Chilembwe who was under Booth's tutelage was mentored to become an African public theologian through his engagement with such radical liberational theological ideologies and practices (Soko-de Jong 2022:3).

Booth's 'Africa for the African' philosophy is crucial in Chilembwe's formation as an African public theologian because it was seeded with an African vision of independence, sovereignty, self-reliance, self-determination, and development which can be summarised in the following way:

Let the African, sympathetically led by his more experienced Afro-American brother, develop his own country, establish his own manufactures, work his own plantations, run his own ships,

work his own mines, educate his own people, possess his own mission stations, conserve the wealth accruing from all sources, if possible, for the commonwealth and enlightenment of the people and the glory of God. (Booth 1996:12)

John Chilembwe in the USA

Shepperson and Price (2000:85) aver that Joseph Booth took Chilembwe to the United States of America (USA) in 1897. This trip had African public theological ramifications:

For if Chilembwe had not gone to the USA, he could not have become a minister of an American Negro Church; and if he had not been such a minister, he would not have been able to build up, in his own country, with the assistance of American Negroes, the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM), from which in 1915, the uprising against colonial domination in Africa was launched. (Shepperson and Price 2000:88)

Booth's taking of Chilembwe to the USA also played a significant role in Chilembwe's formation as an African public theologian because it introduced him to a different socio-political context which was characterised by racial inequality and discrimination, particularly affecting the American Negroes in several ways. First, the Negroes were disenfranchised since the hopes of the Civil War and the emancipation from slavery had not yet been realised. Second, the political promises associated with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the constitution which would grant the Negroes full citizenship rights had not yet been fulfilled. Third, the white supremacy which was championed by the Ku Klux Klan manifested itself in intimidation and violence against the Negroes. It was also characterised by bribery and the manipulation of the states' political structures in order to frustrate the federal government's protection of the rights of Negroes. Fourth, the Negro was denied the right to vote in most southern states, including Virginia, where Chilembwe spent most of his time in the USA. Fifth, the Negroes' political participation in Virginia was virtually curtailed. Sixth, racial segregation was observed in public spaces such as trams, depots, hotels, restaurants, barber shops, schools, etc. Seventh, lynching, which involved a public killing of an individual who had not received the due process of the law or justice, was

widely practised against the Negroes. Eighth, Chilembwe himself was on several occasions stoned at Richmond, Virginia, by mobs of white youth for being in the company of a white man, Joseph Booth (Shepperson and Price 2000:93-97).

Chilembwe's stay in the USA made him appreciate the American Negroes' situation as a framework for engaging with the liberational praxis (Fiedler 2016:5). According to Cone (2011:6), the concrete black experience of suffering and inhumanity provides a framework for a liberational praxis for achieving humanity, dignity, and well-being for the Negroes and Africans (Vellem 2012:2). Thus, the American Negro situation played a twofold role in Chilembwe's formation as an African public theologian. First, Chilembwe absorbed some political liberational ideologies, particularly on how the Negroes thought about their situation of oppression. Second, Chilembwe observed that the Negroes did not exemplify a socio-political apathy but were actively involved in their own liberation in order to achieve freedom, human dignity, and self-determination. For instance, the Negroes engaged in self-mobilisation and agency through the development of their own spirituality and independent forms of worship. This led to the formation of Negro Baptists, Methodists, and independent messianic groups which were all discontented with the prevailing racial discrimination and subjugation. Hence, a foundation was laid for the development of a liberational spirituality, independence, an entrepreneurial and industrious spirit yearning for freedom, and advancement of the Negroes' socio-economic status.

Chilembwe's stay in America helped him to make connections between the American Negroes' agenda and the liberation of indigenous Africans. For instance, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Rev. Charles Morris, of the Negro Baptists of America, believed that both American Negroes and Africans were tied in a single destiny that needed emancipation. Thus, Chilembwe learnt some indispensable lessons from the Negro churches of the USA that were formative in his journey as an African public theologian. For instance, he learnt ministerial and operational strategies for running an independent church such as the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) which would later become the centre for socio-political mobilisation and agency in Nyasaland (Makondesa 2006:74).

John Chilembwe at Lynchburg Theological Seminary

Shepperson and Price (2000:113) write that Chilembwe later separated from Booth due to circumstantial reasons such as Booth's lack of financial resources to support Chilembwe. Nevertheless, Booth handed Chilembwe over to the care of Rev. Lewis Garnett Jordan, Foreign Missions Secretary of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). Dr Jordan arranged for Chilembwe to attend the Virginia Theological Seminary and College, a small Baptist institution at Lynchburg, Virginia. The seminary's mission was to prepare Christian preachers, teachers, and workers to serve among the Negroes. Furthermore, the seminary's staff and students were zealous advocates for the American Negro emancipation and African upliftment and freedom. Therefore, Chilembwe's enrolment at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College intensified his radical religious ideas, emphasis on the industrial aspect of education, and spirit of self-confidence and self-determination for the Negro and black African's destiny; a liberational theology and praxis played a crucial role in Chilembwe's formation as an African public theologian.

Shepperson and Price (2000:113) insinuate that Jordan took Chilembwe to Rev. William Wells Brown, who was the pastor of the High Street Baptist Church. Brown was an influential preacher of the 'social gospel' and he felt that he had a responsibility for the world's redemption, especially Africa. Hence, he regarded his meeting with Chilembwe as divine providence which motivated him to pay for his education.

Shepperson and Price (2000:113) argue that Chilembwe's encounter with Rev. William Brown played a crucial role in his formation as an African public theologian in several ways. First, Brown's background of slavery and his eventual escape from slavery on 1st January 1834 motivated him to embark on an anti-slavery mission and to bring liberation to all oppressed human beings in the Americas and in Africa. He later became a liberational lecturing agent for the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society in 1843. He also used his publications to expose the dehumanising situation of slavery in his struggle for liberation. Some of his anti-slavery and liberational publications were: (a) the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (1847), (b) *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), and (c) the first African American play, entitled *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom* (1858). Hence, Chilembwe's encounter with Rev. William

Wells Brown cultivated in him a liberational theology and praxis which was formative in his construction of an African public theology.

Rotberg (1965:345-373) hints that Chilembwe's period at Lynchburg played a crucial formative role in at least three ways. First, his social experience regarding the prevailing prejudice against Negroes later motivated him to fight for the freedom, equality, and dignity of Africans. Second, his interactions with Gregory Hayes, the principal of Virginia Theological Seminary and College, and his exposure to radical Negro ideas through the works of John Brown, Booker T. Washington, Fredrick Douglass, etc. were formative for his quest for the empowerment of Africans and the pursuit of egalitarianism. Third was his initiative to start the African Development Society which was headed by Gregory Hayes; the headline of its prospectus was: 'Che John Chilembwe, of East Central Africa, Gen. Solicitor'. Its manifesto was modelled after Booth's 'Africa for the African' and espoused the industrial mission philosophy and the re-settlement of American Negroes in Africa (Shepperson and Price 2000:117).

Phiri (1999:116) writes that Chilembwe was ordained as a Baptist minister at Lynchburg in 1899. He successfully completed his studies at Virginia Theological Seminary and College in 1900 and was awarded the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Divinity degrees. Thus, Chilembwe's attainment of higher education equipped him with critical thinking skills that later enabled him to engage with the evils of colonialism in an informed manner.

John Chilembwe's Praxis

Makondesa (2006:19) writes that John Chilembwe returned to Nyasaland in 1900 as an ordained minister, a missionary in his own land. His missional praxis was aimed at empowering and developing the lives of people who were disenfranchised and disadvantaged by the prevailing colonial regime in Africa. His praxis further provides evidence of his engagement as a harbinger for African public theology and this can be gleaned from his theological thought, actions, and writings.

It is therefore imperative for this article to explain Chilembwe's praxis, which serves as a harbinger for African public theology. Chilembwe's praxis will be looked at in at least seven areas: (1) establishing the Providence Industrial

Mission (PIM), (2) establishing schools, (3) promoting women's empowerment, (4) a vision for Nyasaland's nation-building, (5) protesting against the conscription of African soldiers, (6) the voice of African natives in the present war, and (7) organising the 1915 uprising against colonialism.

The Providence Industrial Mission (PIM)

Makondesa (2006:21) states that John Chilembwe launched the Providence Industrial Mission (P.I.M.) on 1st February 1900, on the eastern side of Mbombwe River, in Chiradzulo district. He had adopted the name 'Providence' from an institution in New York which funded his stay in the USA. He also adopted the word 'Industrial' from Joseph Booth's industrial mission philosophy.

Tangri (1971:306-307) demonstrates Chilembwe's liberational praxis from his preaching which imparted the values of hard work, self-respect, self-help, and human dignity to his congregation. He preached against social injustice in Nyasaland which was characterised by a multi-faceted oppression concerning African land rights, labour tenancy, *thangata*, hut tax, and the conscription of African soldiers (askaris) to fight in the First World War (McCracken 2012:130-132).

Chilembwe's praxis was implemented through the PIM ministry modelled after American Negro churches who used their respective churches as hubs for liberational mobilisation and agency (Harris 1994:43). As such, the PIM became a centre for spiritual and political formation and action. This can partly be explained based on the fact that most of PIM members were also workers in the European plantations in Nyasaland. As such, the gross human rights violations against them subsequently became a burden for the church which had zealously worked for the improvement and liberation of their lives. Hence, Chilembwe's praxis can be considered as an early development of African public theology based on the various interventions he made in alleviating the plight of indigenous Africans in view of the prevailing colonial domination and ill-treatment of Africans in the European plantations (Ross 2020:188).

Soko-de Jong (2022:4) argues that the PIM's ministry shows some similarities with the early forms of African public theology that Chilembwe had learnt at the Virginia Theological Seminary and College and in his interaction with

American Negro churches, for instance, the application of a holistic ethos which combined orthodoxy, i.e. the Baptist faith according to the NBC which had ordained him, and orthopraxy, i.e. the right conduct, action, practice both ethical and liturgical, and engagement in daily life arising out of one's religious beliefs. This can further be exemplified by the pursuit of progress inspired by a spirit of self-determination because the PIM as a community of believers determined their own projects and built their own church building at a time when most imposing churches in Nyasaland were built under European supervision. Thus, they were independent in their practice of faith and worship.

Chilembwe's praxis through the PIM ministry demonstrates that he was a harbinger of African public theology for two reasons:

First, he gave interpretations of and guidance to society's various sectors, institutions, and interactions, and possibly to evaluate between religious beliefs and practices as they bear on matters of public concern. Second, he provided such interpretations and guidance in ways that would be intelligible and potentially persuasive to those inside and outside the institutional churches. (Breitenberg 2003:67)

In this way, Chilembwe exemplifies the role of public theology as Resane explains:

Public theology is located in the societal context and makes proposals or initiatives of practical steps to be taken to remedy the maladies identified in the nation. Initiatives are determined by the shape and size of the social ills dealt with. As a non-institutional religion, public theology endeavours to provide resources for people to connect between their faith and the disturbing issues facing their society. (2019:4)

Establishment of Schools

Makondesa (2006:74) relates that John Chilembwe championed education as an integral part of the work of the PIM. He had believed that education was a

tool for societal transformation. His holistic vision for education of Africans can be summarised in the following words:

By giving the children of Africa good training they will be able to possess an indomitable spirit and firm dependence upon God's helping and sustaining hand. And make observations which will be of greatest use to different tribes of African Sons, who only need the quickening and enlightening influence of the Gospel of Christ to lift them from this state of degradation, and to make them suitable members of the Great human family. (Shepperson and Price 2000:127)

Chilembwe's aim in developing seven independent native schools was to give the indigenous Africans knowledge and skills which could enable them to be reliable and productive citizens of society. Thus, he engaged in a citizenship education which equipped his students to critically engage with the public sphere in order to achieve the common good. He understood that for the Africans to successfully engage in conversations and actions that curb societal oppression they needed an education that cultivates liberational thought, character, and action as essential prerequisites in engaging with the public sphere. (Chiroma 2019:235).

Chilembwe also used the schools to inculcate socio-political activism in his students. Mr Maynard Gibson Mbela, an alumnus of PIM schools (1904-1907) comments on Chilembwe's political activism:

Chilembwe taught us a good deal about planters and white settlers. He complained about the planters who were cruel to their African tenants, stopped them from collecting firewood and cutting trees from their estates etc. Indeed, the Europeans did not seem to like him because they used to send detectives to his mission to find out what he was doing. (Makondesa 2006:74)

Shepperson and Price (2000:146-147) write that Chilembwe's purpose for establishing schools seems to be multi-faceted, i.e. evangelism, social-economic upliftment, and socio-political activism. This can be seen in the

various initiatives he introduced like teaching African women to make dresses and encouraging the Africans to dress decently, stay in a hygienic environment, and venture into various enterprises like hunting and agriculture for commercial purposes. Thus, Chilembwe was a harbinger for African public theology because he sought to understand and exemplify the relationship between the Christian faith and the broader economic, socio-cultural, and political context in which ordinary Christians lived (Thiemann 1991:21). Moreover, Chilembwe should be considered as a public theologian because of his pursuit of making the Christian faith relevant to public challenges and initiatives for mobilising Christians for socio-economic and political engagement in order to achieve the common good (Resane 2016:55).

Promoting Women's Empowerment

Makondesa (2006:40-42) alludes that Chilembwe seeded a feminist vision of women's empowerment in his Christian ministry as early as 1900, something that was rare and inconceivable for Africans at that time. He was keen to create an egalitarian community in which both men and women are equal and have opportunities to progress in life. Therefore, Chilembwe is a precursor to feminist public theological discourses.

Makondesa (2006:41-42) gives a sevenfold analysis of Chilembwe's feminist vision:

1. He considered the training and development of women as a special work that must be done with urgency. He argued that the mothers of the race must not be forgotten in doing God's work.
2. He compared the work among women to the laying of a foundation for the future of the African race.
3. He lamented the gap in development that existed between African men and women. The men were developing faster than women and, in his view, this created an unbalanced and unhealthy progress for society.
4. He lamented the unfortunate state of the heathen African woman which he described as ignorant, uninteresting, unlovable, and lacks ambition. However, what she needs is to be brought out of darkness into the light through the Gospel of Christ.

5. Chilembwe and his wife, Ida, discouraged early marriages and encouraged the young girls to attend school and be involved in vocational skills development i.e. sewing.
6. Mrs. Ida Chilembwe¹ served as a model of an empowered woman who is not only a good house wife but a professional since she worked as a teacher at P.I.M. school and a trainer in the women's sewing classes.
7. Chilembwe and his wife exemplified egalitarian principles of gender equality and equity in their life and ministry.

Chilembwe's feminist praxis resonates with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's reclamation of ecclesiology as the foundation for constructing a feminist public theology. She asserts that:

Ekklesia in its classical Greco-Roman and early Christian contexts referred to 'the political decision-making congress or assembly of full citizens' and suggested, at least in principle, a radical (i.e., grassroots, or popular) democracy, in which all citizens enjoy equal rights to full participation. The ekklesia of women functions as a critical concept for analysing patriarchal aspects of politics and religion and for pinpointing incongruities between egalitarian ideals and exclusionary practices in both political and religious life. With regard to politics, ekklesia when combined with women helps to crystallize and challenge the tensions and outright contradictions between egalitarian political discourses and actual ideological political practices that largely entitled only certain elite men and women to full citizenship. With regard to religion, ekklesia when combined with women highlights the inconsistencies between egalitarian ideals and exclusionary practices in early and contemporary Christian communities. (Fiorenza 1984:154-157)

Sherlock (1994:46-63) says that the National Baptist Convention sent Miss Emma DeLaney, an African American missionary, in 1902 to work with John

¹ Mrs Ida Chilembwe was very instrumental in giving a practical touch to the women's side of the schools, with her classes in sewing and deportment. Hence, the mission possessed a number of sewing machines demonstrating a high capital base in Nyasaland at that time (Shepperson and Price 2000:171).

Chilembwe at the PIM. Her main focus was in uplifting the lives of women and girls in several ways: (1) sewing, (2) decent dressing, (3) singing, (3) hygiene, (4) house-keeping, (5) fighting against early marriages, (6) fighting against sexist norms, (7) fighting against female circumcision, which she described as a combination of heathenism and barbarism, and (8) serving as a midwife in helping African women in the birthing process. Thus, Chilembwe's feminist praxis provided Emma DeLaney with a platform for implementing a women empowerment ministry which created an alternative space to a predominantly patriarchal, religio-cultural order that was exclusionary to women's being, perspectives, voices, experiences, and lived realities (Manyonganise 2023:90).

Therefore, Chilembwe's feminist praxis articulates succinctly resources for deconstructing patriarchal religio-cultural practices, as well as offering empowerment to confront structures that cause women's vulnerability and perpetuate their subjugation and oppression in society. In this case, Chilembwe prefigured an early form of an African women's public theology that not only identified areas of women's injustice but proceeded to engage the church and the society by empowering women to be active participants in shaping their own destiny, bringing society transformation, and advocating for gender justice and women's equality in order to enhance their well-being and realise their full potential in life (Mwaura 2015:10).

Chilembwe's Vision for Nyasaland's Nation-building

Shepperson and Price (2000:411) submit that at the heart of Chilembwe's religio-political engagement was a futuristic construction of an egalitarian society which provided equal opportunities to all people, transcending tribal and racial boundaries. Hence, Chilembwe as a harbinger for African public theology exemplifies an early indigenous political philosophy aimed at constructing a model African state (Ross 2020:189).

Shepperson and Price (2000:415) argue that Chilembwe articulated a vision for the emergence of the concept of nationhood for Nyasaland. This is exemplified in six ways. First, in his writings he used wider territorial expressions such as 'Nyasaland' to refer to the African people of the Protectorate. Second, he signed his 1914 anti-war letter which preceded the uprising 'on behalf of his countrymen' and clearly this had national implications. Third, he included the migrants (*Anguru*) from the Portuguese territory, Mozambique, who had

settled in Chiradzulu and Zomba. Fourth, his conception of the Nyasaland nationality was multi-racial, including some Europeans as mentors and specialists. Fifth, he encouraged Indian traders to be patriotic and rebuked them for sending the money they made out of the country, thereby depriving Nyasaland of capital. Sixth, Chilembwe envisioned statehood and citizenship in Nyasaland to be better as compared to the colonial period. He dreamed of the Nyasaland state based on principles of good governance, equality, and citizenship with responsible rights and duties (Kobo2010:68).

Shepperson and Price (2000:435) argue that Chilembwe's praxis has implications on the history of African nationalism (Sithole 1963:37-39). Chilembwe had a vision of creating a progressive African state, with selective European assistance,² in which native Africans, would run their own industries and enterprises (Nieman 2010:37-44). However, Chilembwe was also conscious that such a state needed spiritual, ideological, political, and economic foundations (Maluleke 1994:245-258). For him, his conception of the African state entailed the unity of all African independent churches implementing the industrial mission philosophy in order to achieve spiritual, ideological, political, and economic progress (Martey 2009:47). In so doing, the African state would be unshackled from financial dependency, oppressive monetary policies of global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and economic enslavement as a result of globalisation (Ismi 2004:3).

Protesting Against the Conscription of African Soldiers in Wars

Shepperson and Price (2000:143) write that Chilembwe was very vocal at the loss of over one hundred and fifty Nyasaland askaris in the Somaliland military campaigns against the 'Mad Mullah'. Similarly, Chilembwe was disturbed by the awful experiences of the families of the askaris who had died in the war. For instance, a heart-breaking incident for an old woman who had went to Zomba in 1904 to welcome back her sons who were conscripted as soldiers to fight in Somaliland:

An old woman had come eighty miles to welcome back her six sons. Standing amid the cheering crowds she saw the troops

² This should be understood as bilateral agreements in a win-win situation rather than the exploitative ones that represented the colonial and neo-colonial agenda in Africa.

march past and enquired after her boys. She then learnt for the first time that all of them had been killed [...] War has its price of sorrow even for the untutored African who takes his share unwittingly in the burden of the Empire. And there still remains the question to be answered: 'Is it right?' (Shepperson and Price 2000:143)

Makondesa (2006:125-126) accounts that Chilembwe criticised the colonial authorities for recruiting African soldiers (askaris) to fight in the First World War. Page (2019:20) laments the tragedy of Nyasaland's askaris (soldiers), *tenga-tenga* (non-combatant porters), their families, and wider communities during the First World War. Unavoidably, the war created a general discomfort in Nyasaland which provided the context for the 1915 Chilembwe uprising.

Ross (2020:246) observes that the Nyasaland askaris' involvement in the battle at Karonga, which was fought on 8-9 September 1914, resulted in many casualties for the British forces who lost sixty soldiers, forty-nine being Africans, with many more being wounded in the conflict. The situation for Nyasaland askaris was exacerbated due to the fact that tens of thousands lost their lives, and the survivors were battered, broken, and mutilated for life, and were dumped in their villages without pensions, medals, and any form of care from the British Protectorate. Thus, Chilembwe was very much concerned about the plight of the Nyasaland askaris, their families, and broader African communities that were affected by the First World War. He felt duty-bound to challenge the involvement of his countrymen in the First World War. He critically engaged with the prevailing socio-political issues in the public domain from a theological point of view (Kusmierz and Cochrane 2013:50). And as a minister of the gospel, he had to be a voice of the voiceless, the main target of public theology (Resane 2019:5). Hence, Chilembwe's religio-political praxis exemplifies an African public theology which is prophetic in nature (Pieterse 2013:1-6). Smit mentions several features of public theology which are apparent in Chilembwe's praxis:

Public theology should be critical, in opposition, resisting, warning, critiquing, opposing what is already happening in public life [...] and this constitutes the role of the church and the task of theology. (2013:84)

The Voice of African Natives in the Present War

John Chilembwe's protest against the conscription of African soldiers in the First World War led him to write a letter which was published in the *Nyasaland Times* on 26th November 1914 entitled: 'The Voice of African Natives in the Present War'. This letter is significant for the discussion on John Chilembwe as a harbinger for African public theology because it is his last surviving first-hand public document. Hence, it gives us some clues to his thoughts, perspectives, lived experiences, and lived realities which later culminated in the 1915 uprising. In other words, apart from theology acted, this letter serves as a source of his written theological and socio-political thought, which helps us determine his public theological contributions. The letter is here published in full:

We understand we have been invited to shed our innocent blood in this World War which is now in progress throughout the wide world.

On the commencement of the war we understood that it was said indirectly that an African had nothing to do with the civilised war. But we now find that the poor African has already been plunged into the great war.

A number of our people have already shed their blood, while some are crippled for life. And an open declaration has been issued. A number of Police are marching in various villages persuading well-built natives to join in the war. The masses of our people are ready to put on uniforms ignorant of what they have to face or why they have to face it.

We ask the Honourable government of our country which is known as Nyasaland, will there be any good prospects for the natives after the end of the war? Shall we be recognised as anybody in the best interest of civilisation and Christianity after the great struggle is ended?

Because we are imposed upon more than any other nationality under the sun. Any true gentleman who will read this without the eye of prejudice will agree and recognise the fact that the natives have been loyal since the commencement of this government, and that in all departments of Nyasaland their welfare has been incomplete without us.

And in no time have we been known to betray any trust, national or otherwise, confided to us. Everybody know that the natives have been loyal to all Nyasaland interests and Nyasaland institutions.

For our part we have never allowed the Nyasaland flag to touch the ground, while honour and credit have often gone to others. We have unreservedly stepped to the firing line in every conflict and played a patriot's part with the spirit of true gallantry. But in time of peace the government has failed to help the underdog.

In time of peace everything for Europeans only. And instead of honour we have suffered humiliation with names contemptible. But in time of war it has been found that we are needed to share hardships and shed our blood in equality.

It is true that we have no voice in this government. It is even true there is a spot of our blood in the cross of the Nyasaland Government.

But regarding this World Wide War, we understand this is not a royal war, nor a government war, nor a war of gain for any description; it is a war of free nations against a devilish system of imperial domination and national spoliation.

If this were a war as abovementioned such as war for honour, government gain of riches, etc, we would have been boldly told: Let the rich men, bankers, titled men, store keepers, farmers and landlords go to war and get shot.

Instead the poor Africans who have nothing to own in this present world, who in death, leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire distress are invited to die for a cause which is not theirs.

It is too late now to talk of what might or might not have happened, whatsoever be the reasons why we are being invited to join the war, the fact remains, we are really being invited to die for Nyasaland.

We leave all for the consideration of the Government, we hope in the mercy of Almighty God, that someday things will turn out well and that the Government will recognise our indispensability, and that justice will prevail.

Signed

John Chilembwe

On behalf of his countrymen. (quoted in Ross 2020:246-249)

John Chilembwe's letter has several African public theological implications which are discussed below. Firstly, he lamented that a number of his countrymen, 'have already shed their blood', others were being 'crippled for life', 'invited to die for a cause which is not theirs', and

the poor Africans who have nothing to own in this present world, who in death, leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire distress (Ross 2020:246-249).

Thus, John Chilembwe as a harbinger for African public theology, raised a public outcry against the plight of African soldiers' participation in the war. Resane explains the character of African public theology:

Public theology is always public, speaking in public places and addressing the public issues for the sake or benefit of the public interest. (2019:1)

Secondly, Chilembwe reminded the colonial government of the natives' loyalty to all Nyasaland interests and institutions to the extent of being patriotic in fighting in the war. However, he bemoaned the fact that the government failed to reciprocate the people's goodwill by improving their general well-being and livelihoods. In this regard, Chilembwe was a precursor of African public theology because he tried to hold the government of his day to be accountable to its citizens and implored it to improve their welfare rather than just exploit them (Ross 1996:22).

Thirdly, Chilembwe as a harbinger for African public theology rebuked the colonial government for degrading the natives' human dignity and violating their rights. He wrote that 'instead of honour we have suffered humiliation with names contemptible'. Makondesa (2006:127) argues that this statement conjectures that the prevailing social injustice inflicted by the European planters on the natives was under the government's watch. For instance, Chilembwe was conscious of labour rights and criticised the prevailing *thangata* system in the Shire Highlands (Shepperson and Price 2000:143).

Mkandawire (1977:185-191) explains that European settlers introduced *thangata* work as an obligation imposed on the tenants living on their estates in lieu of cash rent. Chirwa (1994:530) argues that overcrowding on the Crown Lands and the plight of the migrant workers (*Anguru*) who had no claim to communal land exacerbated the labour situation. Therefore, the only option for the *Angurus* was to remain on the estates and perform *thangata* work. In this case, '*thangata*' meant forced unpaid labour.

Fourthly, the conclusion of John Chilembwe's letter demonstrates the theological basis for his socio-political engagement. For instance, he wrote that:

we hope in the mercy of the Almighty God, that someday things will turn out well and that the Government will recognise our indispensability, and that justice will prevail.

Thus, Chilembwe's protest against the involvement of African soldiers in the First World War demonstrates that he was a harbinger for African public theology because he made connections between his faith in God and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives (Ross 2020:188).

Fifthly, the letter demonstrates Chilembwe's compulsion to respond to the crisis which had come on African communities in Nyasaland due to the First World War (Ross 2020:247). Makondesa (2006:127) argues that Chilembwe's letter was a precursor to the 1992 pastoral letter which the Roman Catholic bishops wrote protesting the gross human rights violation in Malawi. Mitchell (2002:7) avers that the 1992 pastoral letter exemplifies the church's critical engagement with the government highlighting the abuse of power, the rule of law, respect of human rights, corruption, nepotism, development, transparency, accountability, etc. Thus, Chilembwe as a harbinger of African public theology serves as an outstanding example of the connection between ecclesiastical engagement with socio-political issues. McCracken (2012:140) argues that Chilembwe's praxis exemplifies an inextricable interplay of religion and politics in Malawi.

The 1915 Chilembwe Uprising

Thompson (2017:1) explains that the Chilembwe uprising was a rebellion against British colonial rule in Nyasaland which took place from 15th January to 3rd February 1915. It was led by Rev. John Chilembwe, the pastor of the PIM. Ross and Fiedler explain that:

What is beyond dispute is that John Chilembwe, the pastor of the P.I.M. emerged as the harbinger of political independence for Malawi. Indeed, this was recognised in 1995 when Chilembwe Day (15th of January) was gazetted as a public holiday [...] The uprising gives some clues as to how Chilembwe drew political conclusions from his Christian faith and developed a remarkably early indigenous liberation theology. (2020:188-189)

McCracken (2012:128-136) argues that Chilembwe's motivation for the uprising against the colonial rule in Nyasaland was multi-faceted. First, there was the plight of labour tenants, particularly Mozambican immigrants (*Anguru*) on the Bruce Estates in Magomero, Zomba. Most of them were members of his PIM church. However, they suffered from labour abuse, were often physically ill-treated, and suffered under the *thangata* system. They also suffered from an increase in hut tax in 1912 and from the effects of a famine in 1913 (White 1989:131-133). Second, there were his own personal problems such as debts, lack of financial support from the National Baptist Convention which had drastically reduced since 1914, and health problems, i.e. asthma and failing eyesight (Rotberg 1965:365-366). Third, there were frustrations in African middle-class men who were educated in mission schools and were denied career opportunities and a political voice by the government and the settlers (Shepperson and Price 2000:240-250). Fourth, the African casualties in the First World War, both soldiers and porters, greatly affected him, and the government demands for more porters directly impacted the members of the PIM (Page 1978:89-90). Fifth, Chilembwe's attitude changed from passive acceptance of European dominance to rebellion only between October 1914 and January 1915, and he was pushed into an uprising by the millennial expectations of his more militant followers (Bone 2015:5-6). Sixth, the timing of the uprising in early 1915, shortly after the start of the First World War and

also at a time of apocalyptic expectations, was no coincidence (Bone 2015:5-6). Seventh, Joseph Booth's influence on Chilembwe regarding egalitarianism and independence, particularly through the ideas published in his book entitled *Africa for Africans* (Langworthy 1996). Eighth, towards the end of his life, Chilembwe was so charged with nationalistic and black power sentiments, to the extent that he interpreted salvation to mean freedom from colonial domination rather than freedom from Satanic dominion (Phiri 1999:28). Ninth, the government planned to deport Chilembwe to the Seychelles because of his criticism against the use of African soldiers in the First World War. Thus, Chilembwe made a pre-emptive attack before the authorities could arrest and deport him (Makondesa 2006:131).

Two important questions to grapple with concerning the 1915 Chilembwe uprising are: (1) Was the uprising a result of a theological decision? (2) Was it an outworking of a public theology? Ross considers the basis of the uprising to be

a combination of the evangelical faith with a radical social and political standpoint. The Baptist faith that cultivated a deep spirituality among the PIM members also played a socio-political conscientisation role regarding the injustice and violence of the colonial rule. (2020:247)

Ross (2020:189-199) writes about two testimonies given by Rev. Harry Kambwiri Matecheta and Rev. Stephen Kundecha before the Commission of Inquiry concerning the Chilembwe uprising. The two ministers of the Blantyre Mission attested that Chilembwe was much obsessed with the passion for freedom and this was reflected in his theological orientation as a pastor and in his praxis as a protester (Randall 2023:173). Therefore, Chilembwe's uprising can be interpreted as a form of 'theology acted' (praxis). In other words, his violent engagement with the colonial rule reflects an outworking of a public theology because he made the theological connections between salvation and political emancipation.

Shepperson (1953:13) argues that the theological character of the uprising should be placed within the context of Ethiopianism and African nationalism. Nmah and Okonu (2022:16) state that 'Ethiopianism' expresses a threefold

African liberational movement focusing on political, cultural, and religious emancipation, appropriating the Bible as the basis for African liberation.

Rukuni and Oliver (2019:1) explain that “Ethiopianism by definition is an ideology derived from selected events within the history of Ethiopia and its vintage status in biblical times. Ethiopianism transforms the narratives of Ethiopia into metaphors of African nobility; subsequently influencing discourses of mission, pan-Africanism, autonomy and assertive sovereignty” (p.1).

The origin of Ethiopianism both as an African movement and an ideology is based on Psalm 68:31-33, which mentions two African countries, namely Egypt and Ethiopia, thus: ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands onto God’(KJV). Duncan (2015:205) states that John Chilembwe’s praxis was inspired by ‘Ethiopianism’ which served as a basis for his engagement in the uprising as a means of achieving liberation from colonial domination. According to Ross,

Although the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 may have appeared to be futile; nevertheless, the memory of the uprising was a potent factor in the evolution of the nationalistic consciousness which finally resulted in the independence for Malawi. Therefore, Chilembwe is an outstanding example of a public theologian who demonstrates the intersectionality between ecclesiastical independency and political nationalism. (2020:189)

Mjura Mkandawire captures the sentiments of John Chilembwe as a public theologian by Malawians in their commemoration of the Chilembwe Day on 15th January every year through a popular liberational song:

Kunali John Chilembwe (There was John Chilembwe)
Mu boma la Chiradzulo (From Chiradzulo district)
Mbusa wa mphamvu (He was a powerful preacher or pastor)
Atsamunda achizungu anakangana naye, boma linakangana nayenso
(The white settlers and the colonial government fought against him)

Koma iye sanalole kuti anthu ache apitirirebe kuona zinthu zovuta (But he didn't allow for his people to continue facing injustice)
Zochokera kwa atsamunda achizungu (from white colonialists)
(Mjura Mkandawire and the MBC Band no date)

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the Chilembwe religio-political praxis serves as a harbinger for the construction of African public theology. The threefold task of public theology is apparent in Chilembwe's praxis. This means that he, first, clarified the fundamental public contents of the Christian faith drawn from scripture and tradition. Second, he demonstrated Christianity's public relevance and reasonableness. Third, he examined and unveiled Christianity's public meaning, significance, and impact on society.

John Chilembwe as a harbinger of African public theology demonstrates a triangulation of theology believed, theology written, and theology acted within the framework of colonial domination and injustice. Chilembwe's credentials as a public theologian are apparent mainly in the manner he translated his faith into actions by becoming a voice for the voiceless and engaging with the oppressive structures of society. Hence, the paper argues that a retrieval of John Chilembwe's praxis provides lessons that inform contemporary theologians in constructing and working out an African public theology.

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