


# Poison in the bone marrow: Complexities of liberating and healing the nation

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**Research Project Registration:**

**Project Number:** 2019-CHS-  
Dept-1122959

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**Dates:**

Received: 20 Apr. 2020

Accepted: 05 Sept. 2020

Published: 25 Nov. 2020

**How to cite this article:**

Segalo, P., 2020, 'Poison in the bone marrow: Complexities of liberating and healing the nation', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(3), a6047. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.6047>

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South Africa, like many other countries that have suffered through the brutality of colonisation and later apartheid, continues to grapple with ways of healing the scars that remain visible in its citizens' bodies and psyches. These scars are both literal and figurative, and the impact thereof is felt daily, as people try to find ways of navigating the now-'democratised' and 'liberated' country. There is a persistent restlessness, as structural violence continues to affect members of society – especially those on the margins, struggling for survival each day. In her book, *Reweaving the Soul of the Nation*, Mmatshilo Motsei offers insights into ways of imagining the possibilities of reweaving people's broken souls. Using Motsei's reflections as a compass, this article offers insights into the challenges of colonialism and spirituality, and interrogates the complexities of what education means. The article concludes by proposing ways of moving towards the possibility of healing our wounded souls.

**Contribution:** This contribution forms part of the 'VukaniBantuTsohangBatho collection on the Spirituality of Black Liberation' and aims at honoring and celebrating the life and scholarly contributions of Vuyani Vellem. This article responds to the call by highlighting the role of spirituality in the reimagining of African lives and experiences.

**Keywords:** African epistemologies; bone marrow; colonialism; epistemicide; healing; love; reweaving the soul; spiritual selves.

## Introduction

In South Africa we have now become familiar with violence in politics, we have seen proxy wars in post-1994 South Africa and the Marikana massacre is but one of the worst examples of this violence. The structures that are designed to subjugate and annihilate are everywhere in the open and the recent 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign at the University of Cape Town is one example of the struggle against these structures. All these distortions are paradigmatic cruelties and robberies of modernity and its colonising, conquering and christianising mindset. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of apartheid cannot and will not necessarily imply the change of mindset. These walls and their values and goals are in the mindset. To perpetuate these goals and values, Empire colonises the mindset. (Vellem 2015:5)

I open with the above excerpt from Prof. Vuyani Vellem's paper entitled 'Black Theology of Liberation: A theology of life in the context of Empire', in which he critically engages with what he calls 'the cry for life'. This is one of the many works by Vellem, a scholar passionate about the potential of the Black Theology of Liberation and ways in which it could respond to the continuous challenges facing black people in the Global South. For Vellem, the Black Theology of Liberation is 'a state of mind, a consciousness and an existential project of Blackness' (Vellem interview with Laubscher 2018). This article is written in honour of his life. Prof. Vellem passed on in December 2019, and although he may no longer be with us physically, he left behind immense gifts in the form of scholarly contributions that will ensure that his memory and intellectual offerings live on. It is my belief that Prof. Vellem will be remembered for the efforts he made in creating platforms for emerging scholars in academia, and women researchers in particular. His works and contributions were not confined within the walls of academia, as he found ways to create bridges that connected 'formal' academic spaces with the communities around us. I had the privilege of working with and learning from him. His passion for the well-being of this country shone through his interaction with others, and his concerns and lamentations for the well-being of his fellow black men and women are evident in his writings.

Vellem believed that religion could play a significant role in confronting the challenges facing the world. He was, however, quick to critique and highlight the shortcomings of theology by showing how Euro-modernity has rendered (and continues to render) black bodies to the periphery. In an

**Note:** Special Collection entitled VukaniBantuTsohangBatho - Spirituality of Black Liberation, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo (UNISA) and Rothney Tshaka (UNISA).

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interview with Martin Laubscher (Laubscher 2018:4). Vellem asserted that:

Black Theology of Liberation unmasks the obverse side of Western Eurocentric violent and exclusive totality to expose difference as existence rather than classification – Blackness as existing alterity, not a binary. (p. 4)

According to Vellem, the idea of 'Blackness' is a colonial creation and, to this end, to make sense of black people's challenges and woundedness, it is pertinent to grapple with the notion of coloniality. I hope that through our works, we can engage global challenges in ways that offer possibilities towards and for the liberation which Prof. Vellem hoped and strived for.

Many countries around the world have suffered from mass violence that has gone on to redefine how people make meaning of the world and what it means to be human. South Africa is one such country. The story of South Africa is one of triumph and despair. Post-1994, when the country celebrated its first free and fair elections, hopes were high and people felt that their long suffering was nearing an end, but the new South Africa did not deliver on the ideals and hopes for a new dawn and promised land of freedom (Bouchaert 2011; Segalo 2015). Many people continue to swim in the sea of poverty, while annual speeches on the state of the nation, where promises are made to the people, move from the lips of one president to the next. The distance between the government and the people is growing wider, as unemployment statistics and inequality between the rich and the poor increase. Here, I offer a brief discussion of the complexities of colonialism before moving on to engage with the challenge of how we approach the idea of education, and what it means to be educated. Furthermore, I make an argument for the need to return to our spiritual selves and, finally, I offer thoughts on ways in which we might start moving towards the possibility of reweaving our wounded souls.

## Ghostly legacies of colonialism

South Africa has a history of oppression and privilege, both of which were normalised for a long time. It is crucial for us to assume historical responsibility and confront the shadows that persistently follow us, if we are to make sense of our present restlessness. Revisiting the injustices of the past is a crucial project that challenges convenient historical amnesia (Polakow-Suransky 2002). Human dignity is important, as people remember what happened to them; the discourse of reconciliation and forgiveness without accountability and retribution will not erase the gruesome past. It therefore becomes pertinent to let the past inform how we deal with the present. As Ndlovu (2018) argues:

[C]olonial domination in the sphere of knowledge production has played a role *[in]* emptying the minds of African subjects of their knowledges and memories, but has also played a part in implanting foreign ways of knowing and remembering. (p. 95)

South Africa is deemed a 'post'-apartheid and 'post'-colonial state, yet the remnants of these oppressive regimes can still

be felt in the present realities of people fuelled by modernity. According to Vellem (2015):

Modernity as an adverse catastrophic experience lived by black people up to this day calls upon a repudiation of the treatment of colonialism as marginal, particularly in discourses that suggest a 'post' to colonialism without mitigating the tragic relationship between modernity and colonialism. Most of the debates in South Africa post-1994 are faulted along these lines; they continue with philosophical, economic, political and theological insights based on the scientific fascism of modernity. (p. 4)

The end of colonialism was an act of performance, with actions that are symbolic in nature, such as 'democratic elections' and 'independence declarations'. In reality, however, coloniality prevails, as the material conditions of the marginalised continue to remain the same or have, in some cases, worsened. Privatisation has taken hold, and economic capital determines access to the resources needed for a good quality of life. According to Ndlovu (2018:97), coloniality can be viewed as 'a power structure that denies the African subject [...] agency or sovereignty in determining his/her future, particularly a future that is beyond being an object of colonial exploitation'. Ndlovu (2018) further argues that:

[I]n its performative manifestation, the power structure of coloniality is susceptible to transformation and re-arrangement but not total destruction and collapse. Thus, it is through the process of transformation and rearrangement that the power structure of coloniality can evade those fundamental changes that are desired by anti-systemic movements. (p. 96)

The notion of coloniality has extensively been interrogated by scholars such as Wynter (2003), Maldonado-Torres (2007), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) and Walter Mignolo and Welsh (2018), to name a few. I draw from Maldonado-Torres (2007), who offers an extensive definition of what coloniality is and highlights the ways in which it is interconnected to all aspects of life. According to Maldonado-Torres (2007):

[C]oloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (p. 243)

As is evident from the definition above, the effects of colonialism continue to linger through this process of coloniality. For example, the physical shackles of slavery have been taken off, people have freedom of movement, and school and housing segregation has been abolished, yet invisible shackles continue to exist where people suffer from high unemployment rates or earn meagre salaries that are insufficient to enable a decent standard of living. Good-quality education continues to be reserved for those with the financial means to access it. Weighing in on the perpetual challenges of coloniality, Motsei (2017) offers another

dimension by highlighting how the remnants of colonialism can be seen in ways in which African states relate to one another. She uses the example of the national borders between countries, arguing that these are fictional yet real at the same time. With these borders, one can be on the one side and even see the sunset on the other side, but can never freely walk across without official permission, passports and visas. According to Motsei (2017), this is one of the legacies of colonialism that continues to determine how Africa functions. The nation-states that were created by colonial regimes continue to operate, with nations holding onto their sovereignty. This begs the question, 'what are the implications for Africa healing itself?' Motsei (2017) zooms in on this and takes us on a brief historical excavation in her reflection on Africa. She asserts that by continuing to function at the mercy of the (colonial) master and what he has to offer, Africans bump against one another as they attempt to grab the biggest slice from what the master has to spare. Instead of looking inwards for solutions and possibilities for the future, Africa continues to look to the outside, with hands stretched out, begging for what the master offers. To this end, Motsei (2017) urges us to look back and draw from our histories to make sense of the present. This will allow us to re-imagine a future that is not trapped in coloniality. One of the assets that can be drawn upon is African culture. As Idang (2015) states:

Culture, as it is usually understood, entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies. These peculiar traits go on to include the people's language, dressing, music, work, art, religion, dancing and so on. It also goes on to include a people's social norms, taboos, and values. (p. 98)

African cultures were gravely affected by the colonisation process, and this had an impact on how people view the world. Concurring with Idang, Motsei (2017) argues that culture is concerned with how people understand economics, engage with history or spirituality or the land or language, and their overall sense of what it means to be human. Colonisers broke the backbone which allowed people to stand tall, and this resulted in stunted, skewed and wounded souls. If people do not understand who they are, then it becomes easy for them to be swayed in different directions. Motsei (2017) argues that we cannot be spectators who complain about societal challenges, but should rather reclaim our histories and seek ways of returning to who we once were. This return will require shedding and vomiting out the colonial poison we have digested for so long. This poison has spilled over onto various aspects of our existence, including education. It is to the discussion of education that I now turn.

## Rethinking our approach to what education means

In a personal reflection on her Facebook page, posted in 2019, Mmatshilo Motsei shared the challenges of education and its role in knowing one's history. Motsei described an experience in which she attended an event held at Mapungubwe (an

archaeological site in South Africa, between the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana). Many students were also in attendance. Motsei noted how the students appeared disinterested when the history and significance of Mapungubwe were shared. She argued that while it was painful to see many of them busy on their cell phones during the session, she could not fully blame them. She linked this scene to the overall education system which, for so long, privileged Euro-Western forms of knowing at the expense of African knowledge systems. She summed up the experience with the following analogy:

When you feed a child poison for a long time until they grow up, you cannot turn around and give them milk when they are grown up and expect the poison to leave their system. When they have grown up, the milk is useless as the poison would be in their bone marrow by then.

The above excerpt offers a powerful depiction of the importance of a relevant education. Moves have been afoot in South Africa to transform and decolonise the education system, and this has led to many institutions of higher learning calling for a rethinking of the curriculum across disciplines. According to Lebakeng, Phalane and Dalindjebo (2006:70), 'higher education institutional culture continues to privilege western symbols, rituals and behaviours imposed as a result of epistemicide'. There is thus a need to acknowledge this epistemicide (the disregard for, and undermining of, multiple forms of knowledge production) and the violence it causes by privileging one form of knowing (e.g. Euro-Western way of viewing the world) over others (e.g. African epistemologies). Lebakeng et al. (2006) further assert that South African universities are refusing to:

[C]ut the intellectual umbilical cord from the western epistemological paradigm and move away from borrowed discourses ... [*African knowledge systems were considered*] inconceivable and whatever knowledge emanated from indigenous Africans was considered defective, inferior and in need of being developed and refined through Westernization ... often the curriculum does not speak to the experiences of [*African*] learners since the curriculum does not reflect the philosophical, social and technological realities of their environment. (pp. 71–74)

The above excerpt highlights the myriad issues pertaining to Eurocentric knowledge systems which have for so long been imposed on Africans. This imposition came at the expense of African histories and philosophies, which have been relegated to the periphery. In the process, Africans have become strangers to themselves (Manganyi [1984] 2018). African world views were deemed backwards, and 'modernity' was encouraged. Lebakeng et al. (2006) argue that:

[F]rom the perspective of the sociology of indigenous knowledge, the assumptions which constructed Western thought, literature and traditions are not universal but are derived from specific and discreet Western experiences prescribed by specific historical levels of economic and industrial development. (p. 74)



Implicit in this perspective is the notion that standards are not universal, but contextual. Nyamnjoh (2004) argues that even the hundreds of universities created after independence have remained universalistic in terms of how they uncritically accept Western notions of understanding the world, defining local cultures and disregarding African cosmologies and the role they play in how people make sense of their lived realities. Jansen (cited in Lebakeng et al. 2006:74) asserts that 'standards are tentative, constructed, historical and contextual and, therefore, certainly not universal, permanent, objective, neutral or invariant'. It is therefore critical to engage with, and offer space for, multiple ways of knowing and being in the world.

I would like to align myself with Lebakeng et al. (2006:75), with respect to their assertion that it is imperative to inscribe indigenous African epistemology into the curriculum, and acknowledge that 'underpinning education with African Philosophy is, in the first instance, a question of rights, and thus a matter of natural and historical justice'. It is about respect and dignity for multiple forms of knowing, acknowledging them as legitimate and worthy of being embraced and applied in our everyday encounters. It is critical to dig deep and deal with the core of what colonialism has managed to do, if we are to truly understand and dismantle its roots in, and influence on, academia. As Nyamnjoh (2004) posits:

Often missing have been perspectives of the silent majorities deprived of the opportunity to tell their own stories their own ways or even to enrich defective accounts by others of their own life experiences. Correcting this entails paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies. (p. 178)

We need to allow time and space to slow down, reflect and heal – to heal from the kind of education that is oppressive and belittles those perceived to be on the periphery and without a voice. As Motsei (2017) bluntly points out:

[A]s far as education is concerned, when Europeans get an education, they become more rooted in their culture, but when Africans get educated, they become dislodged from their cultural base. (p. 39)

Motsei's (2017) point aligns with that of Nyamnjoh (2004:173), who asserts that 'Africans are still very much dependent on ill-adapted curricula, sources and types of knowledge that alienate and enslave, all in the name of modernity'. To this end, I draw from Shahjahan (2011), who reminds us of the importance of looking into what others bring with them, and what they have to offer, and looking at how spaces for acknowledgement can be created. By creating space for African epistemologies in the education system, we afford an opportunity for a continuation of the rootedness of an African child to his or her values and ways of being. This will only be possible if schools and institutions of higher learning allow space for the redefinition of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Embracing pluri-versal ways of knowing and being in the world is a step towards understanding the complexity of humanity.

The challenges of education are not only limited to curricula and their relevance, but also have an impact on the social conditions within which education takes place. In her book, *Reweaving the Soul of the Nation*, Motsei (2017) engages with the societal challenges that negatively affect the education agenda. She argues that the weapon (education) that can be used by the majority to emerge from poverty continues to be unattainable, when ill-equipped teachers stand in front of classrooms and exhausted children from child-headed families sit behind desks, struggling to concentrate as they spend sleepless nights taking care of younger siblings. This is the true state of the nation!

In challenging us to think differently about education, Motsei (2017) suggests that the education process begins at the time of conception. The woman who carries a child in her womb is the first teacher, and the kind of life she leads will be a major determinant of her child's educational journey. Motsei (2017) asserts that poverty is the worst kind of violence: for example, if 'first teachers' (mothers) are incapable of teaching because they themselves are under-resourced (materially, culturally and spiritually), how will the education process take place? When a person or teacher is under-resourced, he or she cannot teach optimally. For Motsei (2017), motherhood is an integral part of the education process, and we cannot have safe motherhood in an unsafe world.

For Motsei (2017), the terrain of education is a battlefield. Linking the idea of the battlefield with calls for the decolonisation of the education system, she asserts that that system is contested territory and, as a result, there will be 'a lot of blood flowing' before change happens (even though 'blood' is used metaphorically). A heavy reliance on Western epistemologies will not be able to fully assist us in overcoming the African challenges we are confronted with.

## Returning to our spiritual selves

From the time they are born, babies are rooted in their ancestral land by means of a ritual of burying the placenta. From birth till death and beyond, land represents people's spiritual and economic livelihood. Because African spirituality is inseparable from the secular, agricultural productive capacity cannot be divorced from healing people's relationship with the natural and supernatural. Dialogue on the spirituality of land must be opened up as a way of confronting the dichotomy between policy and indigenous spirituality. (Mmatshilo Motsei, speaking at the Unisa Africa Speaks lecture, 03 March 2018)

Within African cosmology, spirituality is intertwined with the land. People use the land to worship, make sacrifices and give thanks. In her discussion on the issue of land and spirituality, Motsei (2017) argues that people are inseparable from each other and from the land. The way human beings relate to their physical environment matters. The natural calamities currently confronting the world are not happening in isolation, but are linked to the disconnect people have with nature. Motsei (2017) calls for a revival of indigenous knowledge systems, as they carry

possibilities for how we might respond to environmental challenges. There is a need to replenish the earth, and doing so will assist us in coming closer to replenishing ourselves as human beings. The healing of the physical environment is thus intricately linked to the healing of human beings.

Drawing from Paulo Freire, Motsei (2017) shows how the (democratic, capitalist) systems we live under create conditions that keep the oppressed in a perpetual survival mode, rather than in a position of 'real' power or 'true' independence. This perpetual state of survival ensures that control is maintained by those in power, who continue to make decisions on behalf of the rest. Equity is never the goal, but providing just enough for production to continue, is the aim (Motsei 2017). I would argue, however, that the aim should be to move towards a society that treats everyone with respect and acknowledges each individual as fully human. This is where the project of decolonisation becomes useful, as it engages the idea of what it means to be human and to be treated as such. It engages the myriad ways in which coloniality perpetuates inequality and uneven access to resources. Motsei (2017) posits that:

[O]nce you have vomited, you can never eat your vomit again. In other words, once you have vomited the lie (that you are free and independent), you can no longer serve as a vehicle for the perpetuation of colonial power over Africa. (pp. 20–21)

One of the ways in which we can return to acknowledge and respect African forms of being is through art forms. As Motsei (2017) reminds us:

Whether performed at home in a naming ceremony, or in a village praying for rain, art has played a significant role in amplifying the voices of people, such voices having been muffled by colonial administrators ably assisted by Bible-clutching, gospel-preaching missionaries and gun-slinging slave traders. (p. 29)

Art comes in multiple forms and serves a variety of purposes – it is about rituals that connect us to the spirit world, it is about survival, it is about hope for the unseen ... the rhythms and harmonies that connect people ... it is about the collective. It is the body connecting to the spirit through rhythm and song. Art is also a form of healing. Through art, 'time and space, spirit and flesh are brought together – these are not separate and do not operate independently' (Motsei 2017:36). Returning to the practice of embracing various African art forms could be another avenue to consider, as we journey towards finding ourselves again.

## Responding to the cry for life: Moving towards the possibility of reweaving our souls

In post-1994 South Africa, and certainly in global discourses on the challenges associated with Empire, to treat racism as a marginal aspect of capitalism might imply turning a blind eye to

the fascist nature of knowledge associated with modernity. Perhaps those who have the liberty and the space to do so could continue, but the cry for life is simply unbearable to those who can hear it. The more we break the seals of Empire, the more we peel back the husk of Empire, the louder the cry. In these adverse, catastrophic experiences of black Africans, women and creation, the energy to hold onto life is our means of securing spirituality for life. Unmasking the husk of Empire is a spiritual matter decolonisation. (Vellem 2015:5)

South Africa continues to struggle with challenges of racism, gender imbalance and overall inequality in various aspects of people's lives. With these challenges persisting, the cry for life seems to be unending. The imbalances of the past have led to coloniality taking hold, leading to social cohesion being an unattainable prospect. Motsei (2017:23) calls on human beings to show love to one another, claiming that '[l]ove is a necessary and natural ingredient for sustainable co-existence'. She is, however, quick to caution that love becomes easier when people are free. For Motsei (2017:25), 'healing our cellular memories after years of mistreatment, which resulted in layers of hate and blame, is essential for reweaving the soul of the nation'. For such healing to happen, Tisani (2019:18) suggests what she calls a process of *ukuhlambulula* or 'cleansing – inside and outside, touching the seen and unseen, screening the conscious and unconscious. This includes healing of the body and making whole the inner person'. A fractured and wounded soul will not be able to love; therefore, symbolic and actual cleansings are crucial.

According to Motsei (2017), one of the best ways of moving forward is to accept the splits within us and embrace them. Trying to go forward as if the damage has not been done is problematic, as it negates the bleeding wounds which many are still nursing. We need to find a way to build ourselves anew, and to re-establish our relationships with one another as human beings. The persistent wound (of apartheid, colonialism and patriarchy) which many people continue to carry is a very sensitive one; therefore, coming out and revealing the woundedness is painful. Hence, there is a need to create safe spaces so that even when people reveal themselves, they know that they are being held in safe hands. This is one of the ways in which we could move forward as a people, and respond to the *cry for life* that Vellem (2015) lamented hearing.

## Conclusion

This article serves as a tribute to Prof. Vellem, a scholar of black theology of liberation who dedicated his life to using scholarship to grapple with the challenges of blackness (and being black) in the world. Drawing from his works and other scholars' insights, I sought to offer some reflections and provocations on what I deem to be 'the concerning state of the nation', specifically by looking at South Africa, but drawing from the African continent more broadly. The article also offered possibilities and ways of rethinking our current condition. I would like to conclude with the words of Mmatshilo Motsei (speaking at a Unisa book discussion seminar, on 07 March 2019):

When you heal trauma, you heal the nervous system. When you heal the nervous system, you heal the emotional body. When you heal the emotional body, you heal the psychic (empathic) body. When you heal the psychic body, you heal vibration. Once the vibration is healed, realities change.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to pay tribute to Prof. Vuyani Vellem, whose works inspired this article. The author also acknowledges Mmatshilo Motsei for the generosity with which she shared her time through her published works, presented lectures, seminars and personal engagements.

## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Ethics Review Committee at University of South Africa on 05 February 2019 (Ethical Clearance number: 2019-CHS-Dept-1122959).

## Funding information

The author thanks the National Research Foundation and the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences for funding the bigger project focusing on decolonisation and African knowledge systems.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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