

**The ingredients to (true) Christianity and theology:
Canaan Sodindo Banana and biblical and
theological studies in Africa¹**

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Abstract

Canaan Banana argued for a true Christianity and theology in Africa in many of his published works. This article has sought to outline the ingredients of this true Christianity and theology showing how especially such ingredients can open up space for biblical scholars and theologians in Africa. Among the ingredients are African culture and religion, African experience as well as equality, justice and fairness. On African culture, religion and experience, Banana questions the privileged position of the Bible while he privileges the Bible when arguing on the other ingredients. This contradiction, it is argued, can open up new possibilities for biblical studies by raising critical questions that demand attention of biblical scholars and theologians. This study uses a socio-historical approach to data analysis and to a lesser extent a theological approach.

Introduction

Canaan Sodindo Banana died something of a pariah in 2003 owing to the criminal conviction for “performing unnatural acts with men” or “sodomy” in 1999 (Gunda 2010:146). In his lifetime, controversy seemed to have taken a strong liking for the man (Chitando 2004:188), be it in his theological convictions and pronouncements or his lifestyle. Zimbabwe being predominantly Christian and with most Christians leaning towards conservatism, Banana’s fall from grace was interpreted as due punishment for having suggested that “the Bible had to be re-written” (Banana 1993). In the controversies that followed Banana, it would appear that most Zimbabweans also lost the opportunity of seeking to understand the man and his ideas

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littered in his works that remain to this day. Banana's ideas could inspire ordinary citizens, politicians and scholars in various academic fields because he refuses to compartmentalise life. However, in this article I will try to highlight and emphasise how these ideas hold prospects for scholars of the Bible, Christianity and theology in Africa. In trying to isolate these ideas, I have consulted most of Banana's written works. I am also grateful to have had access to works on Banana by Paul Gifford (1988), Carl F Hallencreutz (1992, 1996), John S Pobe (1992), Paul H Gundani (1992) and Ezra Chitando (2004), who have all analysed the work of Banana before me.

This article intends to outline some of the ideas of Banana; ideas that constitute the ingredients for what Banana calls authentic Christianity or theology in Africa. While these ingredients are not unique to Banana, there are ways in which Banana acts differently from other African theologians. Life was, on the whole, not to be compartmentalised; his ideas can be understood as political, religious, cultural and economic. His ideas were for an ideal but potentially realisable life. Throughout his works there is the unmistakable mark of "independent judgment" and Banana pursues or articulates his cause "irrespective of more conventional political and ecclesiastical" views (Hallencreutz 1992:6). Besides independent judgment, "Banana's works are set out to reflect on experience and to use the hermeneutic of the preferential option for the poor" (Pobe 1992:22), hence the suggestion that "his theology has arisen from his own experiences and from reflection on them; It is not a product of book learning" (Gifford 1988:412). This article seeks to demonstrate how the ideas of Banana can open up possibilities for biblical scholars, Christian historians and theologians in Africa. The socio-historical approach and a theological interpretation as methods of data analyses are used throughout this article. The assumption behind this choice of method is that to understand the ideas of Banana, one must be able to place the ideas within a socio-historical environment from which the import of the ideas can be realised and hence opening up the possibilities of appropriating the ideas and principles for a different environment. As Banana insists on doing theology, and analyses life within the framework of the existence of God, a theological approach is only necessary.

Canaan Sodindo Banana: Reverend, educationist, political activist and theologian

This section will briefly outline a biographical sketch of the man whose ideas are the major subject of this article. Canaan Banana was born on 5 March 1936 at Esiphezini, Essexvale District, now called Esigodini in Matebeleland (Banana 1990:xii, 1991a:232; Chitando 2004:188), suggesting that he was nurtured in an environment that juxtaposed the excesses of colonialism and the strength of indigenous resistance of the same. The colonial experience of

Banana looms large in his works and his ideas. He attended school at Mzinyati Mission and Tegwani High School (Banana 1990:xii). Chitando (2004:188) elaborates on the early education of Banana by noting that he did standard two to standard four at Mzinyati Mission, then moved to Luveve High Primary School for standards five and six. He eventually enrolled at Tegwani Teacher Training College from 1955 to 1957, after which he taught from 1958 until 1959. In between Banana's time working as a teacher and schools' manager, Banana attended Epworth [United] Theological College from 1960 to 1962 where he trained to join the ordained ministry in the Methodist Church, going a step further than his father who was a lay preacher (Banana 1991a:232). In the 1970s, Banana attended the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC, where he obtained a Masters Degree in Theological Studies and a BA (Hons) in Theology in 1979 from the University of South Africa (Banana 1990: xii). Finally "he also earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1996 at the University of Zimbabwe" (Chitando 2004:190).

While the above paragraph shows that Banana excelled academically, he also excelled in various other activities. Not only did he serve as a teacher and schools' manager, but he was also Principal of Tegwani, Visiting Chaplain at the American University 1973-1975 in Washington DC, Chairman of the Bulawayo Council of Churches, and a member of the Advisory Committee of the World Council of Churches (Banana 1990; Chitando 2004; Gundani 2000). Even more interesting is the observation by Gundani (2000:178) that Banana was involved in the creation of the Student Christian Movement. He was also deeply involved in the politics of his day, both colonial and post-colonial politics. Even as Banana was carrying out pastoral ministry for the Methodist Church, he never understood pastoral ministry as not interested in the politics of the day, hence he was a founder member of the African National Council (ANC) in 1971 becoming the first vice-president with Bishop Abel Tendekai Muzorewa of the United Methodist as president (Banana 1990:xiii). He was involved in various political activities including the Geneva Conference of 1976 from which he then crossed the floor to join Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) (Banana 1996; Chitando 2004; Gundani 2000). In 1980, Banana became the "first president of Zimbabwe until his retirement in 1987" (Chitando 2004:190). Upon retirement from active politics, Banana served as "OAU Eminent Person for Liberia and Sierra Leone and UN Eminent Person on a Mission to South Africa" (Hallencreutz 1996:8). Besides these roles, he also traced his steps back to his other love, teaching, and "became an Honorary Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe" (Chitando 2004:190), where he established himself as a theologian of note who never stopped asking uncomfortable questions.

The ingredients of (true) Christianity in Africa*African culture (religion) as the foundation for African Christianity*

Banana never hid his displeasure at the manner in which western mediated Christianity had treated African culture, rubbishing it instead of integrating itself within the African worldview. He argued “there was very little attempt to understand, develop and baptise the positive elements of African culture” giving “missionaries and their white parishioners a false sense of importance and created in African minds a sense of self-rejection” (Banana 1991a:124). African culture was rejected and replaced “with Western values and systems ... creating an African with a sense of self-rejection and dejection and it created a white with a sense of conceit and self-superiority” (Banana 1991b:4), such that “taken historically the ramifications of cultural bastardisation were earthshaking” (Banana 1996:49). In Banana’s works one can detect a line of argument that clearly asserts that this historical fact must be reversed if Christianity is to rediscover itself as authentically African among Africans. Banana “maintained that African culture had to feature prominently in African theology since Christianity did not encounter a cultural vacuum in Africa” (Chitando 2004:193), suggesting that “any attempt at a relevant theology in Zimbabwe has to recognise that African traditional religion plays a significant role in Africa” (Banana 1996:22). There can never be an authentic Christianity in Africa if Christianity fails to take seriously African culture and religion. The relationship between culture and religion is to be understood as that of container and contained; culture contains several aspects including religion while religion is one of the items contained within culture.

To sum up Banana’s idea of authentic Christianity in Africa, we need to go to his call to rewrite the Bible; there Banana (Banana 1993:29) writes that “religiously speaking, there is no difference between Abraham and *Mbuya Nehanda*”,² raising critical questions for biblical scholars in Africa: What does Banana mean when he makes this assertion? How can one compare and contrast Abraham and Nehanda? Does the Bible hold any special place in Christianity in Africa? Crispin Mazobere (1991:171), like Banana, argues that “prophecies like those of Chaminuka³ are not inferior to those of Old Testament times just because some western missionaries said so”. Are these pre-Christian and traditional mediums authentic mediums of

² Mbuya Nehanda was one of the prominent leaders of the First Chimurenga war, when indigenous Ndebeles and Shonas fought against the white settlers in present day Zimbabwe. She was eventually executed for leading the Shona rebellion and is believed to have prophesied that “her bones would resurrect to reclaim the land” a prophecy believed to have been fulfilled in the Second Chimurenga war, which resulted in independence in 1980. She is metaphorically speaking the mother of Zimbabwe.

³ Chaminuka is a legendary Medium in Zimbabwe.

God's revelation among Africans? Did God reveal God's self through these prominent individuals? How are these mediums to be reconciled with Jesus Christ? The need to integrate Christianity within the African worldview saw Banana attempt an inculturation of "Jesus as our Ancestor" (Banana 1991b:64). At this stage, Banana appears to be much closer to African Inculturation theologians, whose major focus is the cultural identity of Africans as a relevant starting point for an authentic African Christianity. The desire to see a greater role for African culture leads to the next ingredient, that is, African experience.

African experience as the basis for theologising

The role of African experience is important because for Banana "theologising is time and place specific, the church articulates its theological praxes from concrete contexts" (Banana 1991b:1). Due to this specificity African experience is particularly important since "our problems are entirely peculiar to our own situation and will be different today from those of tomorrow as they differ from those of the past" (Banana 1982:85), hence the need to "tell our stories and bear testimony to what has happened and what we have experienced and what has been interpreted" (Pobee 1992:24). The uniqueness of "our problems" is understood as suggesting the peculiarity of "our experiences". This in turn implies that if any solution is to be found it would have to be sought from within these local experiences. As Banana gives primacy to experience, it leads him to "disregard church tradition" (Gundani 1992:43), as when he argues that "creeds and doctrines are almost irrelevant and meaningless to our context, providing answers to questions which we have not asked, and asking awkward questions about problems of our day" (Banana 1991b:42). Banana even challenges the primacy of the Bible when writing "revelation is not confined to the Israelites alone ... Relevant theology, thus, should not be divorced from the experiences of the people: past and present and their vision for their future" (Banana 1991b:40). This line of thinking is forcefully expressed in Banana's *The Case for a New Bible* (Banana 1993:18,21) when Banana argues "The material contained in the Bible is but a small part of the whole gamut of God's revelation to humankind ... The voices of the people of the 'third' world are voices of God's revelation, inspired by God's Spirit. Why are they not reflected in the Bible, directly testifying to God's presence in their lives, in their time?" These demanding questions and challenges from Banana can only be fully appreciated within the context of Banana's insistence on the primacy of a people's peculiar experience, challenging attempts to paint an unchanging "African culture, values and systems".

Having clearly destabilised the bases of established theologies and being fully aware of various criticisms that have been levelled against him by

other scholars, he acknowledges such criticism when writing “my theology has been criticised as *unsystematic* but I make no apology. Why should there be systematic theology? Is there *systematic agony* or *systematic hunger*?” (Banana 1991b:xi my emphasis). Banana responds to his critics by resorting to his own experience, an experience of agony and hunger and asks: “If my experience is not systematic, why should I produce a systematic response?” Banana identifies his point of departure for doing theology as his “*experience* as an activist in the liberation struggle. It is not an articulation of theology of abstract theories ... My theology consists of a critical analysis of relationships” (Banana 1991b:x). He goes further, “my theology originates from the *ghetto*. It emanates from mundane situations of crises, incertitude, an inchoate life and futility, all caused by individualism” (Banana 1991b:xi). Banana’s theology is not a theology that comes from normal life; the ghetto is street name for substandard suburbs created for Africans (as opposed to suburbs) by the colonial system characterised by overcrowding and general deprivation, an environment where “the wealth of the one group and the poverty of the other are correlative. The former becomes richer by impoverishing the latter” (Gifford 1988:413). This experience is and should be central in developing a relevant theology in Africa. Experience is critical because God does not wait for those in the ghetto to go to the low density suburbs to speak with them, rather God speaks with people wherever they are hence their experiences are central in their understanding of God.

Compromise as opposed to true liberation

Compromise was the major failing of missionary Christianity since “the average missionary sympathised and fraternised with his colonial compatriots and therefore could not vehemently condemn imperialist exploitation. And where he did cry out against it, the cry was not for its abolition but for its mitigation” (Banana 1991a:129). He charged “the church has a mission in society, the mission of renewal, reassurance and reaffirmation of basic human rights among the oppressed, the wretched and the marginalised” (Banana 1991b:2), and it was non-negotiable. On the Smith-Holmes Settlement Proposals (1969-1970), the Methodist Synod responded “The Synod of the Methodist Church is not willing to accept or reject the proposals, but we recommend each Methodist member to express judgment to the commission” (Banana 1996:159), to which Banana notes “one may be inclined to submit that the Methodist Church became a victim of the theology of convenience” (Banana 1996:160), noting further that this “was a paradox of the greatest magnitude and in no way could it be reconciled successfully with the tenets of justice as expunged upon in the New Testament, where equality of human-kind before God is stressed” (Banana 1996:94), finding his way into the Bible as scripture. Banana crossed from the side of Muzorewa to join the side

of Mugabe at the Geneva Conference in 1976 because Muzorewa had compromised himself by engaging in secret talks with Smith (Banana 1996:194; Chitando 2004; Gundani 2000).

In speaking against compromise Banana was theologically radical arguing: “God wants to meet us in our strength and not in our weakness. Every time we assert our dignity, we express the sovereignty of God, and every time we become willing victims of injustice, we renounce God” (Banana 1990:xiv). Compromise was inimical to the nature of God and cannot produce true liberation, hence “the material needs of the people in the ghetto must define our theology” (Banana 1991b:10). The vague responses as noted above were made possible because “the liberation aspects of the gospel became obscured and in many circles the churches have been regarded as a cover-up for exploitation” (Banana 1982:50). In articulating his own uncompromising stance, Banana says of *The Gospel according to the Ghetto*, it “is an attempt to affirm the liberating hand of God ... It affirms the need for the ghetto masses to become co-partners with God in His divine mission of moral, economic, political and social revolution” (Banana 1990:xiv). This according to Banana is the mission to which Christians are called to partake and this mission should not be compromised. This he believed notwithstanding the fact that the “negative forces” may change their manifestations by observing that “in Zimbabwe the people fought for fifteen years to destroy the lethal system of exploitation and we must be prepared to fight this system in the new forms that it is likely to take” (Banana 1982:33). Banana understood true liberation to the majority of Zimbabweans to be the “realisation of universal adult suffrage, repossession of land and a share in the material prosperity of the land of his heritage” (Banana 1996:87). People had to be given back their land without necessarily kicking out descendants of the white colonial masters since he counsels “it would be wise for the people of Zimbabwe to accept that racial cooperation becomes paramount if the nation is to become a progressive one” (Banana 1996:76).

Socialism is the legitimate child of Christianity

One of the most controversial aspects in Banana’s works has to do with the relationship between socialism and Christianity. Serving as the ceremonial Head of State between 1980 and 1987; “Church and Socialism emerged as the main theme in the more elaborate theology of Canaan Banana” (Hallencreutz 1992:11), hence “Banana preached the gospel that socialism was more consistent with Christian teachings than capitalism” (Chitando 2004:193-4), seen in assertions such as “Socialism, like Christianity, seeks to eradicate the inhuman and abhorrent class system which is a creation by the notorious capitalist system” (Banana 1991b:52). Similarly, Dzingai Mutumbuka, then Minister of Education in the “Introduction” to Banana’s *The*

theology of promise (1982), wrote “the demands of socialism are frequently not as radical as those of Christianity”. Robert Mugabe (1982), then Prime Minister, in the “Foreword” to the same text wrote: “Rev Banana is issuing an ideological and social challenge to the church to identify itself with the cause of social justice, equality and the development of the poor.” The quest for social justice therefore could not be fully pursued outside of a socialist conviction. Banana’s desire was to see a prosperous and classless Zimbabwe and socialism was thought of as the best toolkit of achieving this state since “the concept of a classless society is essentially theological (Gal 3:27-9)” with the Kingdom of God being “devoid of the iniquitous class system” meaning “that Socialism and Christianity have no fundamental differences” (Banana 1991b:53-4), and that there is “a possible interaction of the Marxist notion of the classless society and the biblical notion of the kingdom of God” (Hallencreutz 1992:19).

In rounding up Banana’s reconciliation of socialism and Christianity, he insists that “socialism is the legitimate child of Christianity” (Banana 1991b:14) and that one can “return to the Bible, mainly the New Testament, to prove that Christianity is nothing else but socialism and therefore Christianity can only be fully realised in socialism” (Banana 1982:117). These were strong statements and it would appear that Banana did not shed his socialist belief as his fellow comrades did at the turn of the decade after independence. Banana was even convinced that “the Kingdom of God should be realised here and now, through socialist revolution or transformation” (Banana 1991b:106). These views predominated especially when Banana was “a theologically committed State President” who expounded vigorously “issues in the field of religion and politics with a view to an increased and more relevant Church involvement in the development of Zimbabwe as a sovereign state” (Hallencreutz 1992:6, 10). On socialism and Christianity, Banana takes flight to the Bible to demonstrate that socialism is biblical. As his early quest was to convince Christians that socialism as practiced in post-colonial Zimbabwe was religious, Banana (1996:44) observed that “the white populace could not have foreseen that the new majority-led government would accommodate religious pluralism and uphold faithfully the values of Christianity”. In short, Banana argues that the values espoused in socialism are the highly regarded Christian values, hence the two were essentially one.

Justice, equality and fairness: the trilogy of revolutionary (true) Christianity

I would suggest that the most important ingredient of Banana’s (true) Christianity is based on the observation that Christianity “dictate[s] a just and equitable society” (Banana 1996:110), where “justice, equality, fairness are all elements that propagate love and peace among humankind” (Banana 1996:131). These demands are already part of “the Old Testament prophets

[who] always denounced the inequitable distribution of goods and the inequality of the society of their times,” risking their [society’s] existence as they failed “to observe justice for all (cf. Amos 2: 6-7, 3:9-10, 5:11, Isaiah 5:8, Micah 2:1-2, Jer. 22:13)” (Banana 1991b:104-5). This observation was extended to the New Testament, when Mutumbuka (1982) noted that “as a revolutionary, Christ pursued the cause for justice and equality to its final conclusion: God’s justice and the equality of all men before God as their common father”.

In an attempt to elaborate on the quest for social justice, Banana can be controversial yet informative. He at once recognises the Bible as scripture and also rewrote the Bible even before he called for the rewriting of the Bible. As he rewrote the Lord’s Prayer, Banana writes:

Teach us to demand our share of gold; Forgive us our docility as we demand our share of justice (Banana 1990:1).		Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:11-12).
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He goes on to rewrite the Apostolic Creed thus:

I believe in a colour blind God, maker of technicolour people who created the universe; And provided abundant resources for equitable distribution among all his people (Banana 1990:2).		I BELIEVE in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (The Apostles Creed).
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In a rewriting of the popular Psalm 23 “The Lord is my Shepherd” Banana writes:

<p>“Freedom and justice are my heart’s desire. Help me, Oh God, to walk the valley of the pursuit of Manhood, And hasten the Day of the Haven of your Love, Power and Justice” (Banana 1990:9).</p>		<p>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie The LORD down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long (Psalm 23:1-6).</p>
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In these excerpts from Banana’s *The Gospel according to the Ghetto*, one realises that the call to rewrite came after he had already rewritten parts of the Bible, reflecting his experience of deprivation instigated by the successive colonial regimes. This Banana justified by arguing that “for Christian theology to talk about hope without relating it to the struggle of the oppressed for freedom in history is for it to sanction the structures of oppression, which deprive the oppressed of their dignity” (Banana 1991b:105). It is in this context that the book *Theology of promise* is seen as attempting to establish “prophetic relevance from within both religion and politics” (Hallencreutz 1987:20) as both spheres must be concerned about human dignity.

In search of elusive justice, equality and fairness Banana proposed in his last major work, *Politics of repression and resistance: face to face with combat theology*, a theology which “ensures that the Cross of Christ is no longer to be used as a sharp edge to cut African feet to force them to fit the theological shoe meant for European and American feet”, charging that such a theology “can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed” (Banana 1996:312). Combat theology for Banana would be the necessary ally to “the armed struggle [through which] we attained independence and started to move towards the promised land, a land where there would be equality and mutual understanding, cooperation, pros-

perity and a better life for all” (Banana 1982:138). Justice, equality and fairness would see Zimbabweans sharing in the prosperity of the land hence he counselled Christians: “the Christian Faith motivates man to aspire for the fullness of life in the HERE and NOW” (Banana 1990:3), and to the majority who had been exploited without respite “thou shalt not live by the exploitation of others; but shall strive for the sharing of prosperity” (Banana 1990:7). Banana elaborated on Combat theology by arguing that it “is in effect, a theology of actionable protest, whose fundamental credo is no retreat, no surrender” (Banana 1996:313), this is not presented as in any way racial making it valid even in post-colonial Africa.

In short, Banana sought to inspire Zimbabweans and the world in general to strive to create societies that are “free and just and egalitarian” (Hallencreutz 1992:14). This society according to Banana would constitute essentially the realised eschatological kingdom of God. This is not a goal that we can easily argue against; in fact it is this realisation of what Banana really stood for that makes him such a towering figure in the history of Zimbabwe. As the battle to realise the society he wished to see continues, it is only proper to come back to Banana and from him scholars and activists from a wide range of backgrounds can develop a plan of action to execute their own contribution to this noble cause. Christianity cannot avoid playing its part in this quest; neither can biblical scholars dodge their own obligations. By this trilogy Banana is essentially advocating some form of development theology where development is understood as:

a process in which the people of Zimbabwe seek the elimination of all forces that keep humanity in misery, such as sickness and death, poverty and hunger, ignorance and superstition, exploitation and discrimination of people by people; it is a quest for a new and joyful society and as such it envisions the emergence of a new humanity, a new heaven and a new earth (Moyo 1987:380).

Critique of Banana

In the understanding of Banana when the ideas above are rightly adopted by societies, true Christianity and theology will then be established in Africa. The first major challenge is whether there is indeed something that is objectively “true Christianity” at all. It should be acknowledged that there are various weaknesses that characterise the ideas as presented by Banana and also the ideas and the life of Banana, especially because “all texts [ideas] have contexts” (Vanhoover 2006:58). When one adds all the different ideas articulated above, one finds a theological enterprise that combines both inculturation and liberation tenets, theological strands that have largely been

treated as mutually exclusive hence two distinct entities (Chitando 2004). On the liberation theological dimension and unlike “Latin American theologians, Guitierrez, Segundo, Sobrino and others who speak from the underside of history on behalf of the Church of the poor, Canaan Banana as Head of State speaks from the position of strength” (Hallencreutz 1992:12). Being a Head of State and having previously been a peasant and a victim of the colonial regimes, Banana’s experience of the post-colonial era was different from that of ordinary peasants and if being a Christian entails “entering into the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ in the power of Christ’s resurrection and entering in anguish and hope into the sufferings of the people” (Pobee 1992:34), it is questionable if Banana could have entered into the sufferings of the people post 1980.

Another point where Banana is widely criticised but still connected to his role as Head of State between 1980 and 1987 is directed at his theological justification of socialism. While Banana was showing that socialism and Christianity was one and the same thing, his government of ZANU (PF) had also adopted socialism as its ideological basis. This observation led Gifford (1988:425) to argue that “Banana was thus apparently promoting ZANU (PF)’s policies as the way of effecting God’s presence on earth.” This is made all the more interesting when one observes that Mugabe and Mutumbuka both wrote pieces in Banana’s 1982 publication, *Theology of promise*. While Banana consistently argued for socialism even after leaving his State role, “the Socialism-transformation that Banana talks about has not shown signs of ever materialising” (Gundani 1992:37). As Head of State, the convergence of Banana’s theology and government policy led Pobee (1992:28) to argue that his theology had “lost something of its prophetic role and has become royal or court theology or to use the language of the Kairos Document, State Theology”.

The accusation of State Theology against Banana was further strengthened by the observation that Banana could not criticise the government of Mugabe for as long as he was the Head of State. “President Banana could not criticise his government’s handling of the security situation in Matebeleland [among many other issues]. He is free to support the government, to advance its policies. He is not free to criticise it,” and he was even guilty of attempting “to recruit the church to cooperate with government and not to criticise it” (Gifford 1992:426, 427). Having excelled in highlighting the evils of the colonial regimes, Banana is accused of lacking “the same strength of critique of the African government and its works” (Pobee 1992:26-7; cf. Gunda 2009:84-102). Similarly, while Banana argued seriously against capitalism, it appears he presided over a State that “instead of redressing the inequity and iniquity of the capitalist order that the people of Zimbabwe struggled against, African mismanagement led to a widening gap between chefs and the *povo* in our society” (Gundani 1992:37). It is interes-

ting also that while Banana constantly reminds his readers of the foreignness of capitalism, he apparently does not seem to realise that even “the Marxist hermeneutic is as foreign to Africa as capitalism is” (Pobee 1992:27).

The final points of critique have to focus on the presentation of the ideas of Banana and his views on the Bible, seeing that the man has several publications spanning over two decades. On the Bible and theology, Banana declares: “To me theology is a science, a philosophy that tries to interpret society’s understanding of God with or without the Bible” (Banana 1991b:42). According to Gundani (1992:43) “Banana’s arguments are not quite coherent and systematic... Banana is not a simple monolith. He contradicts himself so often that sometimes the reader is left confused.” This observation is especially interesting for my work because this self-contradiction is clearly demonstrated when one looks at Banana’s views regarding the Bible. In many instances Banana takes the Bible as normative scripture to be followed by Christians, especially “his own understanding of Jesus and his teaching of the kingdom of God” (Hallencreutz 1992:12-3) in the Bible while also rejecting any special position of the Bible when he argues that “the Bible is merely one of the many sources of God’s revelation” (Gundani 1992:41). The contradiction is also apparent when one considers Banana’s arguments on the primacy of experience and when he equates socialism and Christianity. Is the Bible therefore a special collection of writings that can play a crucial role in the development of contemporary African communities? The second point regarding the Bible has to do with Banana’s use of the Bible in his theological works. To begin with, there is a general disregard of the context of biblical texts to sustain the biblical basis of Banana’s socialism; especially in the manner he uses Acts 2 and 5. As Gifford (1988:413) argues, picking out some verse or text from the Bible to make a particular argument “can hardly be used to make the claim that such is the teaching of the Bible” (Gifford 1988:413). This second point leads us to raise the second critical question, given that the Bible is a special collection of writings, how can this collection of writings be used to contribute to the developmental aspirations of contemporary societies?

Conclusion

There is little dispute that “Banana’s most controversial theological proposal was his call to rewrite the Bible in 1991” (Chitando 2004:195) and that this call is possibly the invitation Banana extends to biblical scholars, Christian historians and theologians. This work is therefore in a way a response to this invitation. It is being proposed in this article that Banana’s call to write a “universal Bible” while clearly “impractical [and] equally problematic” (Gundani 1992:44) may in itself be a realisation by Banana of the need for “normative texts” of “God’s self-disclosure” (Pobee 1992:23), which would

allow for the “transformation of people and of their society. Christians are called to serve as agents of social change” (Moyo 1988:386) whose theology has the important task “to hold dialogue with the world and society in the light of God’s self-disclosure” (Pobee 1992:23). In this context, Banana’s call to rewrite the Bible is not in itself a rejection of the importance of “normative, divine texts”; rather, I would argue that Banana seeks a way of creating such a text, normative and divine. There is a direct association of such normative texts to issues of injustice and exploitation. Despite seemingly disputing the special position of the Bible when highlighting the importance of local experience, when it comes to the desire to fight exploitation Banana can revert to the Bible as Scripture and therefore normative. In essence, Banana appears to suggest that the solution to injustice, inequality and unfairness lies in appropriating the scriptural teachings and principles for contemporary societies.

Another widely shared criticism is the lack of systematic study or writing of theology by Banana, as well as his pedestrian use of the Bible. While I am fully aware of the dangers of having normative texts becoming free-for-all texts, especially because of the ease with which this can lead to fundamentalist and fatalistic uses of the Bible, I am equally inclined to sympathise with Banana’s reading. In reading the Bible, it makes sense to appreciate that “scriptural interpretation [is] a practice which both shapes and is shaped by Christian convictions and practices” (Fowl 1998:22). While it is debatable how many ordinary Christians in Zimbabwe would have known what socialism was, there is no doubt that in the post-colonial era, many Zimbabwean Christians wanted to see greater transparency and equity in the creation and distribution of wealth in Zimbabwe. Banana may have failed to read the Bible as a biblical scholar, but then “Christians, by virtue of their identity, are required to read scripture theologically” (Fowl 1998:30), something that Banana has tried to do. By reading Scripture theologically, I am not suggesting that Banana’s work constitutes “systematic theology”; rather, he reads the texts of the Bible within the context of the aspiration of the people to understand the plan of God for their lives. Banana reads the Bible not as some ancient text, but as Scripture that speaks to contemporary communities.

From this analysis of the work of Banana, two critical challenges arise for biblical scholars in Africa: first, in what ways is the Bible different from other writings? This question demands more than the usual historical-critical responses that will seek to reconstruct the history of the texts of the Bible because of the need to explain the normative dimension of the Bible. It is this normative aspect that makes the Bible powerful both in the private and public spheres in most predominantly Christian African countries, including Zimbabwe. From the challenges posed by Banana, it is also important to begin to answer the question of how African experiences are to be integrated within the existing normative texts, since as biblical scholars, we are loyal to

the existing Bible. In other words, are African experiences represented or prefigured within the existing Bible? Can the Bible remain relevant and valid in Africa, even if it has no historical connection with the people? Finally, the biggest challenge for African biblical scholars has to do with the aspirations for just, democratic societies in Africa. How can the Bible, as a normative text, be appropriated in contributing towards the realisation of these dreams? These and other challenges come to the fore from a close reading of the works of Banana.

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