

REVIEW ARTICLE

Beyond Marxist Framework: Understanding and Recovering the Method, the Theology of Daily Life in Jean-Marc Ela's African (Black) Theology

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Abstract

Considering the surging attention on African Christianity, what distinct contribution would Africa make to global Christianity? Would such contribution be in the increasing number of African Christians or some distinctive ideas and theological methods original to Africa and relevant beyond Africa? This article is an attempt to answer these questions. It does so through the lens of theology and methodology of Jean-Marc Ela. As such, it draws attention to the originality of Ela's African theology, especially his methodology of shade tree theology. It also evaluates some of his radical positions, exculpates his thoughts from charges of Marxist extremism, revises and re-presents his ideas and method as a model of African theology that is attentive to the voices, the thoughts, the wisdom, and the concerns of those at the margins.

Keywords: African Theology, Black Theology, Church, Shade Tree, Jean -Marc Ela, Marxism, Ideological Atheism, Dialectical Materialism, Poverty, Empty Granary.

1. Introduction

In the highly charged introduction of his linguistically dense and rhetorical book, *Afrique, l'irruption des Pauvres*, Ela provides his thoughts on African poverty. For him, Africa is not dead; it is a boiling pot. However, African troubles are of incredible violence[1]. He continues that to those who see Africa as a spectacle, see it as a "dark continent," the context of starvation and of "these poor blacks." However, (Africa is hopeful), and to heal it, the Africa requires attention to the events of the daily lives of Africans amidst the turbulence[2]. Being attentive to people's daily lives, the *shade tree* theology, as he called it, is the core of Ela's theology. To do such theology, the theologian must embody the context of the issue and proceed to social analysis, theological resistance, and theological proposal.

Ela's thoughts are often challenging to understand due to his "unsystematic, rambling, repetitious, provocative style" and some radical positions[3].

Nonetheless, his methodology and (some) thoughts are essential to authentic African and Black theology that speaks to the lives and contexts of the people. His method of intersecting theology with concrete contexts, theology and social analysis, and theology and social sciences is crucial to Black Christian theology becoming a practical science relevant to everyday life. If theology is a discourse about God, such discourse must apply to the everyday life of the people of God.

To learn from, and adequately situate Ela's theology, this article will do the following: first, it will articulate Ela's social analysis of the problem of the Black person. Ela's social analysis is in Africa, where he drew his sources. However, his style and ideas are relevant to Black theology in general. Second, it will discuss the peculiar theology of Ela, *shade tree* theology. Third, it will evaluate some aspects of Ela's theology and position, especially those that appear radical and Marxist, to proper situate the nature of his theology.

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Fourth, it will conclude with the importance of Ela's theological method to African and Black theology.

2. Knowing Jean-Marc Ela: A Priest, Theologian, Sociologist, and A Thinker in the Scene of Disaster

Jean-Marc Ela, a priest, a sociologist, and a theologian, was born to a Christian-Catholic family in Ebolowa, South Cameroon, in 1936. Ebolowa had an active protestant mission at the time of his birth. As such, as a Catholic in such territory, he had a deep appreciation of the Bible. Ela had wanted to be a priest, and as such, went through the required priestly formation process in the seminary in Cameroon. He earned his doctorate in theology from the University of Strasbourg, France, in 1969 before he was ordained a priest in the same year. Ela wrote his dissertation on Martin Luther's idea of God's Transcendence and Man's existence.

Ela was a seminary professor after his ordination. However, he was interested in the mission among the pygmies in the jungle of East Cameroon. As such, he affiliated himself with the Brothers of Charles de Foucauld because of their mission to the pygmies. Ela would later realize his mission to the margins when he heard about the mission of an older Cameroonian priest, Simom Mpecke (Baba Simon), to the Kirdi people of the North Cameroon Mandara mountains. Baba Simon had left parish ministry at Douala in 1959 to become a barefooted pilgrim among the Kirdi in Tokombere. Baba Simon was more of a pilgrim than a missionary because his relationship with the 'pagan' Kirdi people was that of one who was to learn of another way of knowing God, rather than one that brought 'light' to them.

Ela was impressed with Baba Simon's missionary strategy. He left to join him in 1971. He was with the Kirdi people and Baba Simon until 1985. Between times, he had his second doctoral degree in sociology from the University of Sorbonne. Possibly influenced by his experience with the Kirdi people, he specialized in social and cultural anthropology. His dissertation, "Pedagogy of the Look," aspired to do three things. First, to see all aspects of a society in a mutual relationship. Second, to involve the population as a subject in social reforms. Third, to enter a struggle with fate-thinking.

On his return from Sorbonne to the Kirdi people, Ela described his missionary approach as orality. It was about talking to the people about everyday things.

In this way, reflection about Jesus and the history of salvation came spontaneously and was relatable to the people's daily lives[4]. This approach became what he later called "shade tree theology." For Ela, the approach taught him what he could not acquire as a student at the university[5]. The approach would shape Ela's theology, social analysis, concern for the poor, and resistance against institutional violence. It would also define his idea of solidarity with the poor, enabling them to resist their oppressors.

By the 1980s, the government and urban people knew about Ela's work with the Kirdi's. He had taken their side and mobilized them to resist when the government wanted to take over their millet farms for cotton. As such, Ela and some Christian intellectuals considered troublemakers became top priorities for the government[6]. Those targeted and murdered include: Yves Plumey (Former Bishop of Garoua, North Cameroon), Joseph Mbassi, some priests and nuns. On April 24, 1995, Ela's Jesuit friend, historian, and theologian, Engelbert Mveng, was murdered in his home. Ela repeatedly called on the government to account for Mveng's death. On the tip-off that he was next on the hit list, Ela left for Canada on August 6, 1995. He would become a professor at the University of Quebec afterward[7]. Ela was a prodigious writer until his death in 2008.

3. The Social Analysis of Developmentalism and Origin of Empty Granary

Ela's theological landscape is Africa. One of his theological concerns is poverty in Africa. He notes that Africa is faced with developmental dead ends and crises. The continent is overwhelmed with feelings of discouragement, disillusionment, and skepticism. Ela identifies the economic mirages that African political decolonization has produced. For example, the mirage that the Western model of development practices would ensure "human rise" and pass millions of Africans from poverty to well-being[8].

With the above, Ela problematized "developmentalism" and identified it as the core trigger of African poverty[9]. It is that which underscores the sadness and darkness of Africa, for which Africa is "blocked", "betrayed", "disoriented", "disenchanted", "strangled", "broken", "down", "lost, sinking, and makes it appear as a "shipwrecked continent" and the "damned of the earth"[10]. There are multiple layers to developmentalism. First, it underscores the poverty of the rural population that are confronted with an almost

disastrous shortage of cultivated land, and depends on the cost of intolerable labor[11]. Second, it undergirds the structure of the global market and the ruling elites' mental construct, where the industrialized states work together to reconstruct power relations, and African countries have no negotiating power over their economic potential[12]. The one-sided power relations in the global economy reflect the activities of foreign investors, who have a massive presence all over Africa. They finance expensive projects that are, at best, white elephants that benefit businessmen of the global North. Third, developmentalism explains the education system, where universities produce non-relevant degrees[13]. Fourth, it explains the complicities of the ruling elites who cannot create a favorable environment to protect the vulnerable ones from the current "economic cannibalism" and who are unable to listen to the "cry that comes from the trash cans"[14]. For Ela, structuring African economic policies, especially those that impact the rural people, around the structures of developmentalism has caused the rise of many empty granaries in many African communities[15].

The granary is at the center of the community and symbolizes the community structure against the problem of hunger. As such, an empty granary becomes more than a symbol of hunger. It captures the consequences of developmentalism. It is an indicator of multidimensional poverty: famine, lack of access to health, an unhealthy reliance on imported goods, and the objectification of the poor by the World media[16]. It entails the strangulation by the global financial institutions, of African peasants displaced them from their lands, which caused them hunger since the lands meant for food crops have been conscripted for cash crops like cotton[17]. It also refers to the Church's disconnect from the daily realities of the peasants who have been denied access to their basic source of livelihood[18].

The socio-economic indicators of empty granary show a mechanism where people are enclosed in a circle of misery and sickness. Disease and malnutrition are neither the result of guilt nor exist on their own. Instead, they are effects of social organizations-developmentalism. The further consequence of developmentalism is human aggression against one another, a pattern of the impoverishment of the majority by the minority, the economic monopoly by the minority, and the violence that has characterized the system.

While the global economic system has perpetuated the problem, the African elite maintains its sustenance. The elites have adopted the structures of domination left behind by the colonizers, exploiting the peasants and investing the spoils in the West[19]. As such, the African situation makes its present Christian worship idolatrous since a passive acceptance of a system riddled with injustice is incompatible with the worship of true God[20].

4. Ela's Prescription Against Developmentalism: Shade Tree Theology

To reinvent Africa, the continent needs an African Church that can neither perpetuate imperialism, which is contrary to the gospel, nor be neutral to the new forms of slavery, corruption, and the wretchedness of the oppressed in Africa. Since the poverty of the majority is due to their lack of power and inability to speak, the Church must intervene and discover the internal bond between faith and the problems of the people in their everyday lives. The African Church must be invested in the dynamic relationship vital to the existential situations of men and women. The Church must see that the demand of faith is rooted in the "organization of the city of the earth"[21]. The Church in Africa cannot be a Church where nothing moves, where things are stable, a mere source of inner peace and security that is just interested in its freedom to worship. A Church of this type risks the credibility of African Christianity[22].

For the African Church to rise to its duty of reinventing Africa, it must reinvent itself and release itself from its institutional and canonical rubble and the captivity of the Roman structures[23]. It must become prophetic and daring, revise its language, forms, and institutions, and assume a human face[24]. Considering that the problems of injustice, corruption, and famine paralyze African communities, the evangelization of the people must attend to their struggle for actual development. This means that evangelization must be conscious of justice, peace, and freedom. In this way, the building of the Kingdom of God will be mindful of the people's daily experiences and struggles, a struggle that includes the emptiness of the granary[25]

For Ela, the present structures of the African Church alienate it from the people, making the Church a stranger and unaware of their worries and concerns. An alienated Church is unprophetic and ignorant of the gospel, which is the Church's *modus operandi*. The gospel is about Jesus' life, the Christ event, and

the prophetic call to action[26]. Since resistance is part of the memory of the traditional African society, and since the crucified one confronted everything that did not conform to God's will, the African Church's strategy must be to resist any form of injustice. It should prioritize the concerns of slavery, poverty, and hunger, live its faith in solidarity with the poor, rediscover the Christ of the slum, and radically question all structures of injustice. For if “(Africans) must put the Christianity of the museum behind (them), restore the gospels all to its relevance, (Africans) must recognize that the question of God is being presented to the Churches whenever (there is) famine and oppression, (since they) are incompatible with God's plan for humanity and the world”[27].

For an African Church to respond to the African problem, its theology must be African—a *shade tree theology*. Understanding a *shade tree theology* has three layers: it is dialogical and discursive, contextual and symbol-oriented, and liberative[28]. As dialogical and discursive, it begins by acknowledging the equality of all and standing in solidarity with the peasants and their thoughts. As such, it ignores the comfort of the library and the vocabulary of scholars and uses the language of the peasant to speak about God[29]. It is a theology that must return to be people's companions in their everyday life[30]. The *shade tree* theology imagines a local setting typical of the African village system where many gatherings occur under a tree, and decisions are reached through dialectics. This entails that the discovery of truth is a discursive and dialogical process centered around communitarianism. In *shade tree* theology, common ground must be the basis of all beliefs. It is similar to what Benezet Bujo refers to as *palaver*, that is, the subjection of an essential issue to the family's discursive process to test its validity. This makes it a theology brewed out of consensus and discussion among a group of people who see themselves as equal and presupposes recognition of the reasoning capacity and the human dignity of all discussants[31].

It is contextual and symbolic, means that it thinks through the context of the people, their myths, proverbs, cosmology, and everyday realities—symbols and culture are essential to it. Since Africans live in the “forests of symbols,” a unique way of maintaining a relationship with the universe, there is a need to take symbolism seriously in *shade tree* theology[32]. Thus, the ancestral African image is combined with the Christian scriptures, which

makes *shade tree* an outcome of the moral logic of the African ancestors and the Christian scriptures. This implies that the Christian faith cannot ignore or discredit the ancestors, the central symbolism of funerals and worship, the African sense of celebration and initiation rites, and the incantatory power of the word[33]. In a sense, for Christianity to reach the heart and soul of Africans, it must do violence to itself by breaking away from its Western heritage. Christianity can only be meaningful to Africans when interpreted within the context of their symbols. For Ela, being with the people is the task of theology, such that the community becomes the sacrament. The community is not just a gathering of people without a mode of reference; instead, the community bonds through the conventional interpretation of culture and symbol.

Moreover, the Christian faith would only be active if it speaks to people's real-life situations. It would mean that in a community where the ancestral religion still controls agriculture, Christianity must consider the aspirations of men and women who need water and millet. For Ela, Jesus meets people where they are, and as such, the theology that speaks to the *Kirdi*, (African people) is not that of bread but millet. Around the concept of millet, with its farming process, should theology for the *Kirdi* (African people) be built?[34].

The liberative aspect of *shade tree* theology is in its name. The concept of the tree also alludes to the cross of Christ. The *shade* is a symbol of the protection that the cross of Christ gives to his people. As such, the theology must guarantee the protection of the people, that is, liberative[35]. In that sense, the Word of God, which is important to *shade tree* theology must be interpreted through and within people's realities. Within such interpretation, the oppressed are to see themselves in the light of the living revelation of the word of God. Hence, the book of Exodus is essential and must have an African reading. An African reading of the book of Exodus helps to call into question certain theological and ecclesial praxis[36]. In such a reading of the scripture, salvation is indeed an object of hope but also has a present dimension. To be saved means to be delivered here and now. Within this frame, an African reading of the book of Exodus ignores the apolitical disguise of the missionary and identifies the simultaneity of liberation and salvation. God intervenes in people's history by snatching them away from servitude[37]. It is God's intervention in history that will say that God is God. God's word is

immutable, was, is, and will be revealed in history[38]. The revelation of God in history also includes the orientation of the human being towards the history of the human being.

Moreover, an African reading of the book of Exodus is to rescue the majority of African Christians from ignorance of the history of liberation and spur communities to situate their liberation movements within God's acts in the Bible. This reading calls the Church to interpret the divine within the context of people's realities rather than the moralization of religious instruction. Faith must be concrete, and as such, the Church must be in solidarity with those who have been denied human dignity. The Church is called to rediscover the duties of Moses and the prophets as the spokesperson against oppression and abuses of the established systems[39]. Faith loses its meaning when it does not attend to issues of economics and power. Faith is to proclaim the liberation over sin and death attained by Jesus. Structures of domination are sinful, which faith in Christ Jesus cannot ignore. "Christ is life, and a liberation is an option for life"[40].

Ela identifies the "bias" of the gospel in favor of the poor. Jesus' preaching and acting were for the sake of the poor. Jesus's critique of religion was also the critique of society and its status quo. As such, Christianity must engage daily life issue in Africa, where conflicts between the rich and poor are manifested. It must adopt methods that disturb the privileges of those who live under the shadow of power[41]. For Ela, Jesus was not a mild man; he confronted the status quo of domination. As such, the gospel (and the African Church) must confront the strategy where some monopolize the administration of wealth at the expense of others[42].

An African Church, theology, and reading of scripture are not empty rhetoric; they must align towards the African right to be different. The right to be different includes resistance against the construct of the universality of the Church. Ela doubts the reality of communion in the universal Church. He identifies the problem of injustice in the relationship among the local Churches because the developing world's Churches have been denied their full realization and treated simply as third churches. For example, he questions the governance of institutes of African evangelization by personnel from the West. The evangelization of Africa informed by Western influences, thoughts, traits, and traditions creates evangelical anachronism because it is the implantation of a White Church in Black

Africa. Ela judges such evangelical arrangements as neo-colonialist. He thinks that Christianity and colonialization have long-marched shoulder to shoulder[43].

For him, what is at stake is the vitality of Black civilization within Catholicism and the lives of millions of African Christians and the capacity of Christianity to be self-creative. The ecclesiology of dependency inherited from the missions has been perpetuated without examination. The dependence includes financial dependence. As such, the so-called young Churches are born with symptoms of senility. To rediscover itself, the African Church must search for a pathway for liberation. It must not be satisfied with carrying out foreign traditions or seeing itself as primarily and exclusively an extension of Rome[44].

It is within the frame of a resisting African Church, the liberative aspect of *shade tree* theology, that Ela's concept of the "irruption of the poor" can be understood. The "irruption of the poor" is the agency of the poor. The poor connotes two groups of people: Africa, when in contradistinction with the West, and the African peasants, when in comparison with the wealthy Africans. The irruption of the poor means that Africa and its peasants can solve their problems when there is new thinking in the various areas of concern. The irruption of the poor also means that the poor themselves make sense of their situation and mobilize for their development[45].

5. Examining Ela's Methodology and Influences for the Good of Contemporary African/Black Theology

Is Ela Marxist? This question is very relevant for a major reason. To label a theologian interested in social issues Marxist in some parts of Africa and the global North is a subtle way of discrediting their theological efforts. There are suspicions that Marxist analytical tool, especially dialectical materialism invariably imposes Marxist ideological atheism on a supposed Christian analysis of a social issue. The suspicion suggests that it is incongruous to be Marxist and Christian. The validity or non-validity of this claim deserves thorough attention. However, such engagement would distract from the focus of this research. Nonetheless, it will be helpful to this research and theology in Africa and the Black world to rest the Marxist suspicion (primarily a suspicion of predilection to ideological atheism) in Ela's theology. This will help to properly situate Ela's theology in mainstream African theology.

Ela appropriates extensively from Henri Lefebvre, a Marxist sociologist, but criticized as inadequately Marxist by other Marxists[46]. Ela's tools of social analysis, sociology of everyday lives, his sense of unity of persons and objects, his attention to the symbolism of objects, and his critique and suspicion of some Christian practices may have been influenced by Lefebvre[47]. While there are critical tenets of Marxism laden in Lefebvre's analysis of religion, rejection of religion, his analysis of capitalism, and preference for the economy of the proletariat, socialism, there is no substantial evidence that Ela's critique of capitalism and the operations of global trade presuppose a preference for Marxist socialism[48]. Also, it is evident that Ela did not deny the reality of religion, nor was he predisposed to ideological atheism. Therefore, it is sensible to conclude that Ela is not Marxist since his thoughts do not reflect strong Marxist tendencies for socialism and ideological atheism.

On the other hand, it is tolerable to conclude that Ela has Marxist tendencies. Having Marxist tendencies may not necessarily accommodate ideological atheism; but may include reference to superstructures and dialectical materialism in social analysis.

By superstructure, I mean the mental production (a form of thinking) informed by material behaviors and the conditioning of the mind by forces of production in politics, morality, religion, and metaphysics[49]. Hence, a prophet of suspicion with Marxist tendencies can view certain practices within religion or politics through the lens of the superstructure. Ela's suspicion of universal Catholicism as a reactivation of colonialism may have appropriated the Marxist suspicion of the superstructure.

Dialectical materialism, on the other hand, is a multi-layered idea. However, one of its layers critical to this discourse is the economic dialectic and mutual alienation between the classes of the poor and the rich. In dialectical materialism, the alienation of the poor produces depravity which triggers indignation of the poor and antagonism against the rich. In the dialectics between the class of the rich, whose interest is the conservation of the status quo, and the class of the poor, whose interests are the dissolution of the state of affairs, emerges the victory of the poor[50].

However, the victory of the class of the poor would lead to the dictatorship of the poor, which in itself would constitute the transition to a classless

society[51]. While the class concept and the irruption of the poor are evident in Ela, I cannot verify that they transition to the level of dialectics proposed by Marx and Lefebvre, neither can I verify that Ela's class dialectics will be resolved by the dissolution of the society to a classless society. Although Ela was critical of clerical and ecclesiastical privileges and power, he also sought an inclusive Church, a theology arrived at through consensus and an emphasis on the dignity and subjectivity of all persons. Moreover, Ela did not propose the dissolution of the traditional chronological hierarchy in the local African community.

While it is arguable to conclude that Ela's thoughts are laden with some Marxist tendencies, concluding that he was Marxist may be an overstretch. To imagine that a thinker vehemently invested in original African symbols and thought processes, who was also against mental colonialism, is Marxist, will be anachronistic and contradictory. Marxist ideology is foreign to African culture. As such, a Marxist Africanist is a contradiction in terms. Moreover, tolerating the idea that Ela's thoughts are laden with Marxist tendencies only affirms his academic affiliation with Lefebvre. Reasonably, to argue that an Africanist like Ela has Marxist tendencies might be an imposition of a Marxist framework on his intended original African thoughts.

6. The Relevance of Ela's "Rebellious-Liberation" Theology to Africa and the Black World

Despite the above and other concerns about Ela's, his brilliant social analysis, theological framework, and proposal for an African 'liberating' Church are relevant to African and Black Christian theology. His expertise in sociology came to bear in his treatment of theology as a practical science. His method of data collection and process of experimentation expanded intellectual efforts beyond the library and laboratories. Ela's science of theology rejects alienation between the researcher, the data, and the context of the data. All three components of inquiry are woven into a whole. In other words, the theologian (researcher) cannot be separated from the problem of the people (data) and their daily lives (contexts). Ela embodied these scientific principles. His methodology, which he described as a shade tree, a theology of daily life, anticipates what is becoming a normative methodology in theological research called "ethnographic theology" or portraiture[52].

Also, Ela's critique of capitalism and global trade practices exposes the grounds of African poverty and the vulnerability of Africa in global trade relations. Ela succinctly captures these problems when he notes that:

Africa's massive economic dependency is such that people of the forest are forced to buy imported knives. The peasants have become pariahs of African independence and have become the most exploited and undernourished class. This acknowledgment of failure illustrates the general situation of populations subjected to the constraints of peripheral capitalism. The development as we have it does not allow for the living conditions of the masses to improve"[53].

Ela's critique does not suggest total displacement of the capitalist economy; however, his critique, which questions the operational ethics of the system, aligns with those of Pope John Paul II[54]. Ela's critique of capitalism is not only about its operation within the local African context but that its current operation is a vestige of African pre-colonial and colonial history and the lure of developmentalism to African economists as proposed by global trade and financial organizations. Ela's great social analytic insights identify the non-fulfillment and the fakeness of the prophecies of the world economists in the sense that global trade has failed to usher in the African economic renaissance. Instead, it brought impoverishments to the lives of millions of people in Africa. Moreover, the unfair trade deal between the rich North and the poor South continues to cripple the debt-ridden poor nations because of the debt owed to the rich nations whose opinions matter at the trade negotiating table. Also, the global trade deal continues to propel the destruction of local produce and markets[55].

The destruction of the local market is not limited to its inundation with "imported goods," which the Western-influenced African media and internet hub project as better. It includes the non-reciprocity of the free trade agreement and the policy of protectionism in the Western market, which stifles African exports[56]. This relationship does not only assault distributive justice since it ignores fair reciprocity in export-import relations. It also assaults the sense of social justice since it prioritizes the social benefits of one and its motivation for trade over the other. Thus, Ela's critique goes into the core of the continuous multiple dominations of the poor and the internal and the external facilitators of its poverty[57]. This makes Ela

is undoubtedly relevant in his denunciation, and his prophetic "bias" offers a pathway for social analysis by the African Church[58].

Ela provides African theology with an insightful social analysis that helps to locate the depth of African poverty. His ecclesiology also triggers the needed rethinking of the African Church. His thoughts on the near senility of the African Church because of its inability to renew itself beyond the provisions of the missionaries are relevant. Also relevant is that African recovery needs an African Church that is attentive to the everyday realities of its people. However, while Ela provides great insights into the cause of African poverty and the expected response from the Church on social injustice, a great theological method, some of his thoughts have some inadequacies and would need revising.

While a theological analysis of poverty must include how the structures that propel poverty are intrinsically evil, that is, sinful, and obstruct the dignity of God in the poor, and the salvific mission of Christ for the rich and the poor, it cannot ignore the question of salvation or at least the beyond corporeality of the human person whose end surpasses corporeality. The purpose of human life, that is, his or her final end, is central to theology. With such omission, Ela missed the most important question in Christian theology, and provided a sociological description of poverty rather than a theological analysis.

In his analysis of poverty, Ela omitted the theology of the eternal destination of all goods, which is traceable to his Christology[59]. Ela's Christ is a disruptor of the status quo, and most importantly, a historical figure solely invested in the eradication of injustice. His position on the inseparability of salvation and liberation appears to suggest that liberation anticipates salvation, which could mean that to be materially liberated is to be saved. This translation does not conform to Jesus' position that "my Kingdom is not of this World" (John 18:38).

Ela's Christology aligns with that of the Black theology of James Cone. Cone notes that Black theology is not interested in the theological "aseity" of God, except it leads to the liberation of the oppressed on earth. For Cone, Black theology stresses the immanence of God but does not deny God's transcendence. However, God's transcendence is not esoteric; it is the infinite struggle of God in the liberation of black people. As such, Black theology rejects the idea of God's

providence that interprets suffering as a pathway to eternal life[60]. Also, Black theology realizes the reality of human finiteness and death. However, eschaton cannot be contemplation about the future, which ignores the present injustice of the oppressed. Instead, the future must have an impact on the present; hope must be realized in the present[61]. Moreover, Black theology rejects the concept of heaven taught by white theology. Heaven cannot mean the acceptance of injustice on this earth for the sake of eternal bliss. While Black theology acknowledges that death does not have the last laugh and that to die is not to die in vain, it resists undue contemplation on the “yet to come” that does not have a revolutionary impact on the now[62].

However, unlike Cone (and Ela), contemplation on “yet to come” is important to the theology of poverty and oppression. While Christ's event does ignore its political implications, its interpretation cannot lose sight of the return to the Father; otherwise, Christ's events will be reduced to political messianism. As such, theology should have at its core the return to the Father, which is intrinsically linked to the narrative of the eternal destination of all goods and properly situates the importance and the limit of material progress. As such, while the “city of men” is important, it should be in view of the “City of God.”

The principal constituents of theology, broadly speaking, must include a reflection on divine revelation, especially the person as the image of God, biblical imagery, and social analysis. While a theology does social analysis by being intersectional, its engagement with social science for social analysis should not obscure its theoretical practices. As an authentic scientific practice with the legitimacy to produce its cognition, its starting point is not the concrete; rather, abstraction, theories, and conceptualization that are gleaned from divine revelation and the truth of faith[63]. As such, theology of poverty cannot ignore the mystery of the human person, adequate attention to the language of sin, and some scriptural images.

Ela's lean attention to biblical imagery (apart from the book of Exodus) demands a revision of his theology for a theology of poverty. While the sources of the theologian's inquiry are not limited to the scriptures, it is his or her first source. The scriptures provide the first data for reflection on divine revelation, and since the theologian, by his research, joins in a conversation that existed before him or her, he/she cannot ignore previous thoughts on his/her questions.

In other words, the scriptures and the classics are indispensable sources for a Christian theologian.

The importance of the sources of a theologian is due to the fact that their vocation has two important constituents: to respond to the dynamism of faith and to communicate the truth. While the theologian draw from their contexts, they do not disavow the two inseparable constituents. Their search for Truth, which is the living God is to dispose them to the supernatural sense of faith[64]. As such, despite the centrality of rigor and critical attitude to their research, the theologian cannot ignore the metaphysical nature of the object of their study, and as such, cannot ignore the spiritual requirements of their discipline and the commitment to grow in virtue. It would mean that while the freedom of the theologian to search is highly essential, their mastery of the issue and sense of independent judgment that conforms to that of Christ is indispensable[65]. Also, since the theologian is also a member of the people of God, they should be committed to teach people in a way that does not harm them[66].

Ela's attraction to an isolated African Church, which is doctrinally and morally different from the “universal” Church, misses the point of universality of the Church as polyhedric[67]. While the narrative of universalism, in many instances, has been mistaken, at best, were instances of imposed universalized particularities, of which Africa and the Black world have been victims; challenging false universalism with separatism does not correct the error of false universalism. Rather, a correction of such comes through the disposition to an enriching encounter, that acknowledges the gift of the local culture and its rootedness but demands the widening of horizon beyond their narrowness[68]. In this way, an Africa Church can benefit the global world culturally and theologically. A separatist African Church will be hindered from nurturing the global Christian world with its richness in theological imageries, ancestral thinking, and a theology of daily life that does not separate the material sphere from the spiritual.

7. Conclusion

When Theology Listens

How should we do theology? Ela's imagery of Baba Simon, the old wise man whom he assisted and engaged during his pastoral work among the Kiridi, is a relevant image of theological method in Black theology. It means theology takes seriously the art of

listening and walking with the people. It listens to the wisdom of the old, draws from life experiences, and embodying their context. It disposes itself to walking with those at the margins, inserting itself in their context and the context of the data. To predispose itself to doing these, it acknowledges the limitation of its previous knowledge and trusts that God would speak, reveal new ideas through its new sources/teachers. In this way, it acknowledges its limitation in discussing its object- God, and is always aware of the need for its continuous development. By trusting God to speak through those sources, it does not come to those with some pre-determined interpretation. Rather, it listens. With such attentiveness, theology enables itself to retain its status as a living science.

By listening and walking with those at the margins, theology, as God's discourse starts to engage daily life events. With attentiveness to the events of daily life, theology fulfils its role as a science that discusses God as an active agent of history. Also, it reciprocates the gifts of new insights by drawing the margins from obscurity to universal attention, which God always intends. These, I am sure, are the theological legacy of the shade tree theology of Jean-Marc Ela.

8. References

1. Jean Marc Ela, *Afrique L'irruption Des Pauvres: Societe Contre Ingerence, Pouvoir et Argent* (Paris: L' Harmattan, 1994), 9.
2. Ibid., 7-8.
3. Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011),103.
4. I will provide important comments about Ela's methodology below. His appropriation of Henri Lefebvre's principle of non-alienation grounds his shade tree method. This approach has become known today as ethnography or portraiture.
5. Heijke, Jan. "Thinking in the Scene of Disaster: Theology of Jean-Marc Ela from Cameroon," *Exchange* (Leiden, Netherlands) 29, no. 1 (2000): 61–65.
6. Ibid., 72.
7. Ibid., 76.
8. Jean Marc Ela, *Afrique L'irruption Des Pauvres: Societe Contre Ingerence, Pouvoir et Argent* (Paris: Edition L'Harmattan, 1994), 21.
9. Developmentalism refers to the economic narrative in many developing nations like those in Africa, that economic and human development will be achieved through faithful attention to the logic of liberal economic-free market principles. This idea, as noted by some of its critics, for example, ThandikaNkandawire, ignores the depth of the lack of human development markers in Africa, like a good education system and good health system, which cannot be left to the invisible hand of the market forces.
10. Jean Marc Ela, *Afrique L'irruption Des Pauvres: Societe Contre Ingerence, Pouvoir et Argent.*, 21-22.
11. Ibid.,22.
12. Ibid., 23.
13. Ibid.,25.
14. Ibid., 26.
15. Ibid., 63-79.
16. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman, Susan Perry (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 87.
17. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 88-89.
18. Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert Barr (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 1.3-5. Ela thinks the celebration of the Eucharist, a product of the fruit of the earth, is neutral to the weaponization of hunger against the peasants and the vulnerable people. Ela thinks that the Eucharist as a "celebration (that) is not an exhumation of the past, but rather a rendering of the present, an act and a reality that dominate all times." The Eucharist is an invitation to Christians to break, die, and share themselves. For Ela, Africans have shared in this essential action of Christ in a situation of dependence. He wonders how "bread" could be the fruit of the earth in an environment where raising millet marks the socio-economic lives of inhabitants. The rite prescribed for the celebration of the Eucharist bears the marks of foreign culture to Africans. And as such, the Eucharist in the life of the (African) church "has become the locus of daily alienation (of Africans). In this instance, it is in furtherance of the empty granary, which alienates Africans from the Church. See Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert Barr (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1986), 1.
19. Ela, *Quand L'EtatPentre en Brousse, Les Ripostes Paysannes a la Crise*(Paris: Karthala,1990),40. Ela expanded the narrative of domination beyond European aggression in Africa; he located its origin in the feudal relationship between the kings and peasants in pre-slavery and pre-colonial Africa. See, Ela, *La Ville, En AfriqueNoire* (Paris: Karthala,1983),73-74.
20. Ela, *Quand L'EtatPentre en Brousse, Les Ripostes Paysannes a la Crise*(Paris: Karthala,1990), 81-82.
21. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 136-137.
22. Ibid.
23. Ela, *African Cry*, 111. *My Faith as an African*, 154.
24. Ela, *African Cry*, 134.

25. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 90-91, 92-93.
26. Philip Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World: Divine revelation in the Theology of Jean-Marc- Ela, Aloysius Pieris, and Gustavo Gutierrez* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1995), 126.
27. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 97-99.
28. Ela's *Shade Tree* theology can facilitate collaboration and intellectual exchange between African and Latin American theologians. It seems there are points of convergence between *Shade Tree* and *Theology of the People*. At least both theologies attach relevance to the theological insights of the people and the context of their culture. However, the difference between both theologies is also stark. While the theology of the people has been nursed by great scholars of Latin America (Lucio Gerra, Rafael Tello, et al.), and has been endorsed by the Bishops conference of the region, CELAM at Aparecida, *Shade Tree* theology (or palaver by Benezet Bujo) has not found similar attention in Africa.
29. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 180.
30. *Ibid.*, 182.
31. Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing company, 2000), 46. Paulinus Odozor, in his book, *Morality; Truly Christian, Truly African* (2014), mounts a robust critique against theology by consensus. Insisting on the indispensability of revelation to Christian theology and the fallibility of vox populi, he critiques Bujo's palaver. Odozor's critique is an essential response to some aspects of Ela's shade tree theology.
32. *Ibid.*, 35.
33. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 14-28, 40.
34. Kirdi (Mada) is the group Ela worked with and pastored in Northern Cameroon.
35. *My Faith as an African*, 154.
36. Ela, *African Cry*, 28-29
37. *Ibid.*, 30.
38. *Ibid.* 33.
39. *Ibid.* 37-38.
40. Philip Gibbs, *The Word in the Third World: Divine revelation in the Theology of Jean-Marc- Ela, Aloysius Pieris, and Gustavo Gutierrez*, 129.
41. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 105, 117-118.
42. *Ibid.*, 105-107.
43. Ela, *African Cry*, 105-107.
44. *Ibid.*, 108-109, 112. Ela uses the sacrament of matrimony as an example of the freedom and autonomy of the African Church. Arguing for the permissibility of premarital relations between intending couples, Ela appears to suggest that the practice is permissible among Africans because procreation is the first property of marriage among them. Unlike the West, Ela argues that it is important to the African community that the marriage in focus is not the last within the community. As such, premarital relations are part of the marriage process in which marriage is not concentrated in a single instant. Ela further argues that the present ecclesiastical law on marriage dresses it with Western customs without regard for the African customs (114). I am sure Ela identifies a crucial pastoral problem in many African communities where marriage presupposes procreation. However, I will argue that Ela may have exaggerated the extent of cultural permissibility of premarital relations between the intending couple since such does not cut across all African cultures. There are African cultures that emphasize the virginity of the bride and the continence of the couple until the night of the marriage rites. Moreover, Ela minimizes the importance of marital purity in some African cultures and Christianity, and the importance of equality of both couples, which Christianity introduced to many cultures of the world, which the burden of procreation put on the woman partner in marriage in many African cultures challenges.
45. Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 92. The irruption of the poor is extensively treated in *Afrique: L'irruption des Pauvres, Societe Contre Ingerence, pouvoir et Argent* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994), where Ela divides African problems into rural issues, structural adjustment program, social change, economy and culture, the dictatorship of money, and technology. Ela submits that Africa, as the poor (and its peasants), can lift itself out of these problems in which their political elites (and colonialists) have put them.
46. For example, see Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: a Marxist Approach*. 1st MIT Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979).
47. See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Introduction* (Vol 1), trans John Moore (London, New York: Verso, 1991). Lefebvre, *Sociology of Marx* (London: Pantheon, 1969). Lefebvre, Gavin Grindon, "Revolutionary Romanticism." In *Art in Translation* 4, no. 3 (2012).
48. See, Henri Lefebvre, Elden Stuart, Lebas Elizabeth, and Kofman, Eleonore. "Politics" *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*. (New York: Continuum, 2003), Henri Lefebvre, Elden Stuart, Lebas Elizabeth, and Kofman, Eleonore. "Philosophy and Marxism" *Henri Lefebvre Key Writings*. (New York: Continuum, 2003), Lefebvre, *Sociology of Marx*.
49. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *The Marx Engels Reader*, Ed. Robert C Tucker (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1978), 154.
50. Marx, "Alienation and Social Class," 133-134

51. Marx, "Class Struggle and the Mode of Production," 220.
52. For more on the relevance of portraiture, see Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, "Reflections on Portraiture: A Dialogue Between Art and Science," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no 1 (2005): 6,8-12. Lawrence-Lightfoot, "Commentary: Portraiture methodology: Blending Art and science," *LEARNing Landscapes* 9, no.2 (2016): 19-27. Emmanuel Katongole's text *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (2017) artfully captures the paradox and dynamism of portraiture.
53. Ela, *African Cry*, 83-85.
54. John Paul II, "Centissimus Annus," 42. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html . (Accessed June 2024).
55. Emmanuel Katongole, "Postmodern Illusion and the Challenges of African Theology: The Ecclesial Tactics of Resistance," *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, eds. William Cavanaugh, Jeffrey Bailey, Craig Hovey (Grand Rapid, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing,2012), 513.
56. Afua Hirsh, "Trade wars? Africa has been a Victim of Them for Years." <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/07/trade-wars-africa-donald-trump>. (Accessed January ,2022)
57. Ela, *La Ville, En Afrique Noire* (Paris: Karthala,1983),73-74. Ela expanded the narrative of African poverty beyond slavery, colonialism, and global trade. Rather, he located its origin in the feudal relationship between the kings and peasants in pre-slavery and pre-colonial Africa.
58. Also, Ela's ecclesiology rightly detects the inadequacy of the temporal exercise of ecclesial universality. The universality and communion of the Church (Catholic) would be better enriched if it mines the African cultural context. This could also offer more depth to the articulation of some Church doctrines and theology. For example, it would be beneficial to the universal Church if some Marian dogmas were articulated through African cultural contexts since matriarchy, the stool of the Queen Mother, and the spiritual significance of women are integral to many African cultures. The dogma of *Theotokos* would be more understood if re-articulated through the African concept of the Queen Mother. See Vincent Mulago, "Un Visage Africain du Christianisme," quoted by Kwame Bediako in *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 365.
59. Pope Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes," 69, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (Accessed June 2024)
60. James H Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1970, 1990), 81,85. My comparison does not suggest that Cone copied Ela or vice versa. I know of no direct relationship of influence between the two scholars.
61. *Ibid.*,145, 148. Later Cone's theology of heaven is more nuanced than early Cone's. It appears his later works were more disposed to a "transcendent future" that is not exhausted by present reality, expectations, and limitations. See James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972,1992), 88.
62. *Ibid.*, 149-151.
63. Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Methods of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987),71, 75, 80
64. Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for Doctrine of Faith, "Instruction, *Donum Veritatis*: On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian" http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.htmlno. (1990): 7-8.
65. *Ibid.*, 32, 35.
66. *Ibid.*, 9-11.
67. Pope Francis, Pope Francis "Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelium Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's world," 234-237. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (20-28,60-79) (37). (Accessed June 2024)
68. *Ibid.*