

Azania between history and eschatology: Bonganjalo Goba's Africanist theology

**Author:**Obakeng G. Africa¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Philosophy, Practical, and Systematic Theology, College of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Obakeng Africa,
africog@unisa.ac.za

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This article examines Bonganjalo Goba's theological vision through the lens of Azanian Africanist critique, arguing that his historical awareness fundamentally shapes his theology as an Africanist theology. Goba's work, particularly *Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change*, foregrounds conquest as the foundational injustice structuring black oppression, positioning black theology within the broader struggle for liberation. The article situates Goba's theology within the Azanian intellectual tradition, engaging with Joel Modiri's tenets of Azanian Africanist critique – specifically, the insistence that South Africa is an illegitimate settler-colonial construct requiring fundamental transformation. Central to this argument is Goba's eschatology, which frames Azania as an eschatological horizon, rejecting Western theological frameworks that defer liberation to an otherworldly realm. Instead, Goba's theological vision insists on the inseparability of history, faith and the political imperative of black self-determination. By engaging Goba's theology alongside Azanian thinkers, this study demonstrates that his eschatology is not merely a doctrinal position but an urgent commitment to dismantling settler-colonial structures. In doing so, the article reclaims Goba's relevance for contemporary black theological discourse, affirming that black theology must remain attuned to the unfinished struggle for liberation and the realisation of Azania as both a theological and political horizon.

Intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications: This article creates commensurability between Goba's theology and Azanian Africanist discourse (predominantly in law, political science and philosophy). It calls for rethinking theological reflection in relation to historical consciousness, settler colonialism and the black radical tradition within theological and religious studies.

Keywords: Azania; Azanian Africanist critique; conquest, historical consciousness; eschatology.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of discourse on the Azanian tradition, particularly in philosophy, law and political theory. Scholars such as Modiri (2018), Ramose (2018), and Dladla (2021) have reinvigorated critical conversations on conquest, settler colonialism and the enduring consequences of historical injustice. While these discussions have largely focused on political and legal critiques, there remains a need to explore how Azanian thought informs theological discourse. This study addresses this gap by examining the work of Bonganjalo Goba, arguing that his theology aligns with the Azanian Africanist tradition, particularly in his conceptualisation of Azania as an eschatological horizon.

Bonganjalo Goba's theological reflections are deeply shaped by historical consciousness, particularly his recognition of conquest as the foundational injustice structuring black oppression. His work, *Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change*, situates black theological reflection within the broader struggle for liberation, insisting that theology must be grounded in historical realities rather than abstract doctrinal formulations. A defining feature of Goba's theology is his use of Azania, not merely as a political vision but as an eschatological signifier that embodies the hope for a decolonised and liberated future.

While black theology in South Africa has been extensively studied, its relationship to Africanist and Azanian traditions remains underexplored. Smit (2023) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of Goba's work, examining his views on black theology as a parallel to black consciousness, Christian identity in the Third World, and the churches' response to racial

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conflict. However, Smit does not engage with the question of whether Goba's theology aligns with the Azanian Africanist tradition. This study fills that gap by demonstrating that Goba's historical awareness, critique of settler colonialism and eschatological vision place him firmly within an Azanian theological orientation.

This study is grounded in the epistemological assumption that theology is historically and politically situated, and employs a historically grounded hermeneutical approach, analysing Goba's work in conversation with the Azanian Africanist intellectual tradition. Methodologically, it proceeds in three stages. Firstly, it outlines the foundational tenets of Azanian Africanist critique, particularly its insistence that conquest is the foundational injustice of South Africa, its Africanist conception of race and its emphasis on epistemic autonomy. Secondly, it examines Goba's historical awareness, focusing on his recognition of conquest as a structuring force in South African history and his critique of post-1994 reconciliation as a 'conqueror's peace'. Thirdly, it explores Goba's eschatology, analysing his rejection of Western eschatological frameworks, his conceptualisation of Azania as an eschatological signifier, and his vision of the church as an eschatological community engaged in the struggle for liberation.

The central argument of this study is that Goba's theology is Africanist because his eschatology is fundamentally shaped by historical consciousness. By framing Azania as both a theological and political horizon, Goba situates black theology within the larger trajectory of decolonisation, affirming that liberation is both a historical imperative and a theological necessity. In doing so, he offers a theological framework that extends the principles of the Azanian Africanist tradition, thereby providing a crucial intervention in post-1994 black theological discourse and Azanian Africanist discourse at large.

Azanian Africanist tenets

This section aims to provide a clear understanding of the Azanian Africanist tradition by distilling its foundational tenets. These tenets form the conceptual scaffolding for engaging with the theological work of Bonganjalo Goba, whose alignment with the Azanian Africanist framework is central to this study's argument. The Azanian Africanist tradition is rooted in a radical critique of the South African political construct, a distinctive conception of race, and an insistence on Africanity as the foundation for knowledge and liberation. These principles serve as the intellectual basis for understanding Goba's theological orientation, particularly his articulation of Azania as an eschatological horizon for black liberation.

The injustice of the South African political construct

A core tenet of the Azanian tradition is the assertion that South Africa is not merely a state with structural injustices but is itself the fundamental problem. According to Modiri (2021):

The primary thesis and binding motif of Azanian thought is that 'South Africa' is an unjust and unethical political formation and axiomatically racist polity, predicated upon colonial conquest, slavery, and racial subjugation. (p. 56)

This means that South Africa, as a political construct, was founded on the dispossession and subjugation of indigenous Africans, making any attempt at reform insufficient unless it addresses its settler-colonial origins. Properly understood, South Africa is a political construct that was developed by the two colonial powers (the British and the Boers), which will always necessarily include white supremacy and native exclusion and subjugation (Modiri 2021:56). Testament to this fact is *Article 8 of the Vereeniging peace treaty*, which states that, 'The question of granting franchise to the natives will not be decided until after the introduction of self-government' (Milner et al. 1902). This historical foundation underscores why the Azanian critique views the South African state as an inherently illegitimate political entity.

The Africanist conception of race

The second tenet of the Azanian Africanist tradition is the rejection of the colonial conception of race and the assertion of an Africanist racial consciousness. The colonial discourse seeks to naturalise race as an ontological reality, while Africanists view race as a historically contingent construct developed to justify colonial domination. As Modiri (2021: 63–64) puts it, 'the Azanian conception of race neither reifies or conserves the idea of racial difference nor does it disavow the historicity and materiality of race'. This understanding is rooted in the broader black radical tradition, which emphasises race as a socio-political construct that serves the interests of white supremacy. Africanists contend that the idea of race was developed as a pretext for rationalising the Manichean divide that results from the colonial project. What the settler-colonial discourse of race always elides is the fact that the material dimensions of race – used as justification for the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of others – are themselves a product of the dispossession and structural violence enacted by colonial powers. In this sense, race functions as a mythology that legitimises an unjust socio-political arrangement.

Africanity as the basis for knowledge and liberation

The third tenet of the Azanian Africanist tradition asserts that African culture, history, experience and imagination must be central to knowledge production and the liberation struggle. Modiri (2021) argues:

If Black people are to lead and direct their own struggles and be their own liberators, they needed to first cultivate a disalienated consciousness, which in turn required that they critically apprehend their condition and reality on their own terms. (p. 69)

This principle is a direct response to the epistemic dimensions of colonialism, which sought to impose European worldviews on African subjects. Colonial power relations are sustained through consent, which is achieved by imposing conceptual

frameworks that normalise subjugation. In response, Africanists maintain that Eurocentric epistemes must be decentred and replaced with African intellectual traditions. Modiri articulates this imperative in the following terms: Azanian philopraxis recognises 'the need to study and embrace the great African civilisations and kingdoms as well as the great heroes and heroines of the long African liberation struggle...' (Modiri 2021:70). This epistemic shift is necessary for cultivating a consciousness that resists colonial domination and affirms African agency.

These tenets provide the framework through which we can analyse Goba's theology. His historical awareness, emphasis on liberation and critique of colonial Christianity all reflect the commitments of the Azanian Africanist tradition. The following sections will explore how these principles manifest in Goba's theological reflections, particularly his use of Azania as an eschatological horizon for black liberation. By situating Goba within this intellectual tradition, we can better appreciate how his theology articulates an Africanist vision of liberation.

Goba's historical awareness: A focus on conquest and continuity

A central component of Bonganjalo Goba's theological project is his historical awareness, particularly his engagement with the foundational injustice of conquest and its continuity in contemporary oppression. His theological reflections emphasise that the subjugation of black people in South Africa is not merely a product of apartheid but is rooted in the original dispossession and domination enacted by colonial conquest. This perspective aligns with the Azanian Africanist critique, which situates conquest as the defining feature of the South African political order. Although Goba does not explicitly endorse the Azanian position that South Africa is irredeemably unjust, his emphasis on historical continuity demonstrates a theological disposition that is deeply sympathetic to this claim.

This section explores three key dimensions of Goba's historical awareness. Firstly, it examines his understanding of conquest as the foundational injustice shaping black oppression in South Africa. Secondly, it considers his framing of black resistance as part of a long historical continuum, emphasising the *longue durée* of struggle against colonial domination. Finally, it engages with his critique of South Africa's negotiated transition, which he argues has preserved the structures of oppression under the guise of peace. Together, these insights reveal that Goba's historical awareness is not merely an academic exercise but a theological imperative that informs his vision of liberation.

The central argument of this section is that Goba's theology demonstrates an acute recognition of history as a determinant of contemporary oppression and as a guide for theological reflection. By situating his theological critique within the framework of historical continuity, Goba underscores

the need for a theology that not only acknowledges past injustices but also actively challenges their persistent manifestations in the present. His historical awareness, therefore, is an essential component of his theological vision, one that resonates with the Azanian Africanist insistence on addressing the foundational violence of conquest as a prerequisite for true liberation.

Conquest as the foundational injustice

Bonganjalo Goba's theological reflections consistently centre the historical reality of conquest as the starting point for understanding black oppression. In *An Agenda for Black Theology*, Goba (1988:25) asserts that 'one point which is constantly misunderstood by some interpreters of the South African political situation is that our history as the Black people is one of conquest'. This statement aligns with the Azanian critique articulated by scholars like Joel Modiri and Mogobe Ramose, who identify conquest as the foundational injustice shaping South Africa's racial, economic and political order.

Goba (1988) explains that his historical awareness has a purpose:

[T]he point here is not an attempt to give a synopsis of the struggle of our history but to give perspective out of which black theological reflection has to emerge. (p. 22)

By foregrounding conquest as the central determinant of black oppression, he challenges the tendency to treat colonialism and apartheid as distinct epochs rather than as manifestations of a continuous structure of dispossession. This shift is theologically significant because it reorients black theology towards an active engagement with history as a means of envisioning liberation.

Mogobe Ramose extends this argument by demonstrating how the logic of conquest remains embedded in contemporary South Africa. Ramose (2018:326) argues that 'the multi-faced injustice of conquest in an unjust war is still an ethical exigency demanding remedies despite the enactment of the constitution'. This insight reinforces the contemporary relevance of Goba's claim. While Goba was writing in the 1980s, before the political transition, Ramose's critique reveals that the post-1994 constitutional order has failed to resolve the foundational injustice of conquest. Instead, it preserves the power relations established through colonialism, repackaging them under the language of democracy and human rights.

By engaging Goba alongside Ramose, we can see that black theological reflection must not only acknowledge conquest as a historical event but also resist the theological normalisation of a political order that remains structurally defined by conquest. If, as Ramose argues, justice demands a post-conquest South Africa, then Goba's insistence on historical awareness becomes even more urgent. Black theology, in this sense, must remain a site of critical

contestation – refusing to separate theology from the unfinished struggle for liberation.

The *longue durée* of struggle

This historical awareness of conquest as the foundational injustice not only grounds Goba's theological reflections but also informs his understanding of the protracted nature of resistance, which he frames as an enduring struggle that predates apartheid and is rooted in the broader context of African resistance to colonial conquest. Goba's theology recognises the continuity of resistance against conquest, aligning with the Azanian Africanist tradition's emphasis on the multi-century struggle for liberation.

In contrast to theological perspectives that detach faith from historical struggle, Goba explicitly rejects the notion that liberation theology should transcend ideological and nationalist concerns. Smit (2023:579) highlights this aspect of Goba's work, noting that he contrasts with Allan Boesak's 'ahistorical' assertion that 'Christian faith transcends all ideologies and all nationalistic ideas'. For Goba, such a position risks depoliticising theology and obscuring the structural nature of conquest. Instead, he insists that liberation must be understood in direct relation to the material and historical conditions of oppression. This perspective is evident in his critique of mainstream South African historiography, where Goba (1988) argues:

Apartheid, as many modern historians want us to believe, is not a modern phenomenon emerging with the coming into power of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party in 1948. Our struggle for liberation as a people began when we first came into contact with white people. Testimony to this historical fact is our primary resistance movements in which some of our great chiefs, such as Shaka, Dingane, Mzilikazi, and Sekhukhune, fought the imperialist forces. (pp. 21–22)

This historical continuity underscores Goba's view that liberation theology must be rooted in the lived experiences and historical struggles of the oppressed, resonating with the Azanian insistence on framing liberation within the context of ongoing resistance. Goba's recognition of this historical continuity finds powerful resonance in Sobukwe's (2024b) assertion that history itself must be repeated if African liberation is to be realised:

Afrika desires the progressive improvement of her sons and daughters [...] This must be achieved by the Africans for the Africans. It is possible that the battles of Blood River, Keiskam[m]ahoek and Thaba-Bosiu will be fought again, this time under the banner of African Nationalism; here, history must be repeated, if our African revolutionary struggle must be victorious. (p. 151)

Sobukwe's words amplify Goba's argument by making explicit that the struggle against conquest is not only historical but also necessarily cyclical – unfinished as long as the foundational structures of colonialism remain intact. The invocation of past battles reminds us that resistance is not simply an intellectual or theological task but an embodied, lived struggle that spans generations.

Furthermore, Sobukwe challenges colonial narratives that depict precolonial African societies as fragmented and politically immature. In a 1959 interview, Sobukwe (2024a) argues that African nation-building predates European colonialism:

The germ of the Movement was there even before the advent of the European. When Moshoeshoe brought the scattered remnants of various African tribes and moulded them into a patriotic Sotho tribe, he was engaged in nation-building. Similarly, Chaka's wars whereby he sought to establish a single authority in place of many tribal authorities of Natal were, we say, steps in the direction of nation-building. In the Cape, the House of Gcaleka was recognised as the Paramount authority. There is no doubt that the pressure of social and economic conditions would in time have given rise to the Union of these territories. (p. 154)

This statement reinforces Goba's historical analysis by demonstrating that African political unity was not an artificial construct imposed by colonialism but an indigenous historical process. It challenges the settler-colonial justification for conquest, which relied on portraying African societies as disorganised and in need of European governance. By integrating this perspective, we can see that African resistance was not only about defending land but also about preserving a trajectory of nation-building that was violently interrupted by conquest.

Goba's and Sobukwe's insights together push us towards a theological reflection that does not merely acknowledge African resistance but sees it as a foundation for envisioning liberation. If history is cyclical, as Sobukwe suggests, then black theology must remain committed to the ongoing struggle, refusing to accept the post-1994 order as the culmination of liberation. Instead, it must insist that true liberation lies in the full realisation of black self-determination, unencumbered by the structures of conquest that persist in the present.

Critique of 'conqueror's peace'

In his article titled *The State of Black South Africa: A Theological Perspective*, Goba critiques the compromises of South Africa's negotiated transition, one that is popularly described as a 'miraculous peace'. He contends that this 'peace' perpetuates systemic violence against the oppressed. This anticipates the Azanian tradition's characterisation of South Africa's transition as a 'conqueror's peace' that maintains the structures of colonial domination (Dladla 2021:3). Goba's historical awareness situates this critique within a broader theological context, where liberation is not merely a political project but an ethical and spiritual imperative to restore justice. His emphasis on addressing structural violence rooted in conquest aligns with Azanian critiques of the post-apartheid state's failure to dismantle settler colonial structures. Goba (1994) articulates his sentiments in the following terms:

In every age the church is confronted by these messianic pretenders. This we encounter especially amongst some of our church leaders who have committed themselves to the view that the present negotiations will usher in a new political dispensation.

At a time when most of our people are killed in black communities, we hear deceptive claims about peace. And yet the structures of violence represented by the military continue to promote havoc and destruction. (p. 8)

Goba's critique in 1994 is striking not only for its theological depth but also for its historical timeliness. Writing at the cusp of South Africa's democratic transition, Goba offers one of the earliest interventions in what would become a sustained Azanian critique of the post-apartheid state. His contention that those who characterise the negotiated transition as peaceful being deceptive, demonstrates an awareness that such rhetoric perpetuates systemic violence. It also reflects a profound awareness of the dangers of historical amnesia. He was identifying a discursive situation that obscures the continuity between the violence suffered by the poor and black communities in the present and the foundational violence of conquest.

By situating the systemic violence of 1994 within the broader trajectory of colonial domination, Goba highlights the etiological salience of conquest in shaping the structures of oppression that persist even after apartheid. His critique resists the celebratory narratives that accompanied South Africa's political transition, instead drawing attention to the unfinished business of justice and liberation. This aligns with the Azanian tradition's insistence that the failure to dismantle settler-colonial structures perpetuates the conditions of exploitation and dehumanisation.

Goba's theological reflection, framed by the language of 'messianic pretenders' and 'deceptive claims about peace', exposes the complicity of political and religious leaders in perpetuating historical amnesia. Their focus on the promise of a 'new political dispensation' obscures the enduring legacies of conquest and structural violence. For Goba, this amnesia is not merely an intellectual oversight; it is a theological and ethical failure that allows systemic oppression to remain unchallenged.

Theologically, Goba's intervention underscores the importance of historical awareness in black theological reflection. His work calls for a praxis-oriented theology that resists the erasure of history and insists on addressing the root causes of injustice. By connecting the violence experienced by black and poor communities in 1994 to the foundational violence of conquest, Goba reframes the post-apartheid moment as a continuation of the struggle for liberation, rather than its conclusion.

In this way, Goba's 1994 critique stands as a prophetic and foundational contribution to black theology. It not only challenges the narratives of peace and reconciliation that dominated the transition but also insists on the enduring theological and ethical significance of confronting historical violence. His reflection remains a powerful reminder that the fight for liberation must always engage with the etiological salience of conquest and the structures of oppression it created.

Goba's eschatology: Azania as an eschatological signifier

Bonganjalo Goba's eschatology is deeply informed by his historical awareness. Just as his theology insists on confronting the foundational injustice of conquest and its ongoing manifestations, his eschatological vision refuses to separate liberation from history. For Goba, the future hope of black people is not an abstract, otherworldly promise but a historical and theological horizon – the realisation of Azania. This framing aligns with the Azanian Africanist critique, which insists that true liberation must dismantle the structures of settler colonialism rather than accommodate them.

This section explores three key dimensions of Goba's eschatology. Firstly, it examines his theological rejection of Western eschatological frameworks that divorce faith from historical struggle. Secondly, it considers his use of Azania as a theological horizon, arguing that it functions as an eschatological signifier for black liberation. Finally, it engages with his understanding of the church as an eschatological community, actively working towards the realisation of Azania. Together, these insights demonstrate that Goba's eschatology is not merely a doctrinal position but a historically rooted and praxis-oriented vision of liberation.

The central argument of this section is that Goba's theology is Africanist because his eschatological horizon is Azania. By situating Azania within the theological imagination as the ultimate expression of liberation, Goba reconfigures eschatology as a historical and political imperative. His theological vision resists the dualism of Western Christian thought, instead offering an Africanist eschatology that insists on the inseparability of history, liberation and divine promise.

Rejecting Western eschatological frameworks

A fundamental critique in Bonganjalo Goba's theological project is the rejection of Western eschatological frameworks that separate faith from historical struggle. For Goba, such frameworks are not merely theological abstractions but are deeply implicated in the maintenance of colonial domination. He argues that dominant theological traditions in South Africa have historically upheld a sharp distinction between religion and politics, reinforcing a dualism that renders theological discourse complicit in the structures of oppression.

Goba identifies the doctrine of the two kingdoms, particularly as developed by Martin Luther and perpetuated by white South African theology, as a major source of this separation. Goba (1988) notes:

One of the ongoing points of conflict and debate within the life of the church in South Africa is: What is the relationship between religion and politics? There is a tendency among Christians to separate religion from politics and it is not difficult to trace

historically this position. It has to do with Luther's views on two Kingdoms, a view which unfortunately has been upheld by the white theological establishment in South Africa for a very long time. (p. 28)

By tracing this division to the theological traditions of figures such as Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Barth, Goba situates his critique within a broader historical-theological conversation. He contends that these theological legacies, as received in South Africa, have functioned to justify political neutrality in the face of injustice, reinforcing an eschatology that defers liberation to a distant, otherworldly realm rather than engaging in the present struggle for justice.

Eschatology as a mode of liberation

For Goba, black theological reflection must reject this Western eschatological framework and instead embrace a vision of faith that is rooted in liberation praxis. Goba (1988) insists that theology should not merely interpret history but actively participate in the struggle to create a new future:

Black theological reflection is no longer simply called to interpret historic documents which reflect the Western Christian tradition but to get down to the serious business of liberation [...] geared toward the creation of a new society (Azania). (p. 4)

This statement signals a decisive departure from Western theological traditions that subordinate historical transformation to abstract doctrinal formulations. Instead, Goba's eschatology insists that the coming future – the realisation of Azania – must be actively struggled for in history. His rejection of Western frameworks aligns with Kritzinger's (1987) assertion that black eschatology is not an isolated doctrine but a pervasive theological orientation toward liberation:

It is clear that to Black theologians, eschatology is not an isolated final chapter of theology, but rather a mood of hope and struggle for the realization of a new South Africa which pervades all of their theology. (p. 15)

By redefining eschatology as an active commitment to liberation, Goba resists the dualism of Western theology and instead embeds eschatology in the concrete realities of black struggle. His theological method challenges any framework that treats faith as a matter of private conviction, insisting instead that true faith must be oriented towards the historical realisation of justice.

The Barthian influence and its limitations

In addition to critiquing the theological dualism of Western eschatology, Goba also examines the dominance of Barthian theology in black theological reflection. Goba (1988) acknowledges that many black theologians, both in South Africa and the United States, have uncritically inherited Barth's theological commitments, particularly his radical Christocentrism and his restrictive doctrine of revelation:

One of the basic characteristics of black theological reflection in South Africa, as well as in the United States, is the predominantly Barthian influence, especially the uncompromising commitment

of Barth to the notion of revelation in which he has emphasized that God could not be discovered by any human process, be it reason or human experience. There is a sense in which this continues to plague our ability to evolve a much more critical theology. (p. 36)

For Goba, Barth's insistence that revelation is exclusively mediated through Christ and Scripture limits the possibilities for theological reflection that engage African history, culture and lived experience. Goba (1988) argues that this restrictive view of revelation has constrained black theology's ability to fully articulate a liberatory theological vision that draws on African epistemologies and historical consciousness:

One of the inherent difficulties with this orientation, as many of Barth's critics have observed, is the limitation of revelation to Christ and the Bible, denying any revelation of God through nature, human reason, or experience. (p. 37)

This critique aligns with the Azanian Africanist insistence that African culture, history and imagination must be central to our epistemic endeavours. By exposing the limitations of Barthian theology, Goba advocates for a theological paradigm that does not merely appropriate Western categories but instead grounds itself in Africanist thought. This shift is essential for rejecting Western eschatological frameworks that spiritualise liberation rather than embedding it in historical struggle.

Decentering Western theological normativity

A crucial component of Goba's rejection of Western eschatology is his insistence that the Western Christian tradition must no longer function as the normative source for theological reflection. Goba (1988:15) argues '[...] as we engage in black theological reflection [...] we cannot treat the Western Christian tradition as a normative source but as an informative source [...]'. By treating Western theology as 'informative' rather than 'normative', Goba calls for a theological paradigm shift – one in which black and African historical experiences become the central epistemological foundation for eschatological reflection. This aligns with the Azanian Africanist critique of epistemic dependency, which insists that knowledge production must be rooted in African modes of knowing rather than Western frameworks that marginalise black experiences.

In doing so, Goba participates in the broader black theological project of disalienation, which seeks to liberate theological discourse from colonial epistemologies. His theological approach is not an outright rejection of all Western thought, but a decisive move towards a decolonial hermeneutic that centres African agency in the construction of eschatological hope.

Goba's critique of Western eschatological frameworks is a direct challenge to the theological dualism that has historically justified passivity in the face of injustice. By rejecting the separation of religion and politics, he argues for an eschatology that is not detached from historical struggle but

is instead embodied in the active pursuit of liberation. His critique of Barthian theology further reinforces this claim, exposing the limitations of a Christocentric and Eurocentric theology that excludes African ways of knowing. His insistence that Azania is a theological horizon of black liberation directly opposes Western eschatologies that defer justice to the afterlife. In this way, Goba's theology affirms the Azanian Africanist critique and reclaims eschatology as a mode of historical transformation.

Azania as an eschatological horizon

A central claim of Bonganjalo Goba's theology is that liberation is not merely a political or social objective but an eschatological imperative. For Goba, the struggle for black liberation in South Africa is inextricably tied to the realisation of Azania, which he invokes as the theological horizon towards which black theological reflection must be directed. His use of Azania moves beyond its political connotations as a symbol of resistance and reconfigures it as an eschatological signifier – a concrete vision of a redeemed future. In doing so, Goba articulates an Africanist eschatology that resists the abstraction and deferral characteristic of Western theological traditions, insisting instead on the immediacy of liberation within history.

This section explores three interrelated dimensions of Goba's eschatological vision. Firstly, it examines his rejection of Western eschatologies that subordinate liberation to a distant, otherworldly hope. Secondly, it considers his framing of Azania as an eschatological horizon that embodies the promise of black self-determination. Finally, it engages with his understanding of eschatology as a praxis-oriented commitment to realising liberation in history.

Rejecting deferred liberation: The demand for a concrete future

For Goba, eschatology must not function as an ideological tool that pacifies the oppressed by postponing justice to a transcendent afterlife. He critiques Western theological traditions for their tendency to spiritualise eschatology, detaching it from the material struggles of the present. In contrast, he asserts that black theological reflection must be concerned with the creation of a new social order – a historical and theological task that requires an active commitment to liberation. Goba (1988) writes:

Black theological reflection is no longer simply called to interpret historic documents which reflect the Western Christian tradition but to get down to the serious business of liberation [...] geared toward the creation of a new society (Azania). (p. 4)

Here, Azania is positioned as an alternative theological vision that disrupts colonial and apartheid-era theological constructs. By explicitly naming Azania as the destination of black theological reflection, Goba signals a decisive departure from eschatologies that defer liberation beyond history. His theological approach aligns with the Azanian Africanist critique, which insists that liberation must be framed within the material conditions of the oppressed rather than relegated to an abstract spiritual realm.

Kritzinger reinforces this point, arguing that black eschatology is not an isolated doctrinal concern but a pervasive orientation that animates theological reflection and praxis. Kritzinger (1987) observes:

It is clear that to Black theologians' eschatology is not an isolated final chapter of theology, but rather a mood of hope and struggle for the realization of a new South Africa which pervades all of their theology. (p. 15)

Crucially, Kritzinger's description of black eschatology provides even greater theological salience to the term Azania. Kritzinger (1987) describes it as:

[A] groping into the future by Black oppressed people who live between Christ's first and second comings, but also between 1652 and the establishment of a just and democratic South Africa. (p. 15)

By framing black eschatology as situated between 1652 (the year of colonial conquest) and the realisation of justice, Kritzinger explicitly links eschatology to the unfinished project of liberation. This reinforces the argument that Azania is not merely a political aspiration but a theological signifier of eschatological fulfilment. Goba's invocation of Azania therefore functions as a theological redefinition of history itself – one that resists settler-colonial temporality and asserts an alternative, black-centred vision of time, struggle and redemption.

Azania as the fulfilment of black self-determination

The invocation of Azania as an eschatological horizon is deeply rooted in the history of black resistance to colonial conquest. Goba (1988) frames the struggle for liberation as a historical continuum, linking contemporary theological reflection with past resistance movements:

Our struggle for liberation as a people began when we first came into contact with white people. Testimony to this historical fact is our primary resistance movements in which some of our great chiefs, such as Shaka, Dingane, Mzilikazi, and Sekhukhune, fought the imperialist forces. (pp. 21–22)

This statement underscores the continuity of struggle and situates eschatology within a historical trajectory that extends beyond the apartheid era. By invoking Azania, Goba reclaims eschatology as a site of black self-determination, countering settler-colonial claims that sought to erase indigenous sovereignty.

Kritzinger (1987) articulates a similar perspective, arguing that for black theologians, the eschatological vision of Azania is not a speculative ideal but a concrete mediation of God's future:

In the light of their analysis of the present situation of suffering, they search the Scriptures for a vision of the ultimate destiny of this world and then develop their vision of a new South Africa (or Azania) as a 'concrete mediation' of this future, along with the specific strategies required to achieve it. (p. 16)

This framing challenges theological perspectives that treat eschatology as a purely metaphysical concern. Instead,

Azania becomes a theologically constructed future that embodies the black struggle for self-rule, land restitution and justice. By naming Azania as the eschatological horizon, Goba affirms an Africanist theological orientation that insists on black agency in shaping the future.

Eschatology as praxis: Realising Azania in history

For Goba, eschatology is not only about anticipating the future but also about actively participating in its realisation. This is evident in Goba's (1988) assertion that the expectation of God's promise requires a theological commitment to challenging structures of oppression:

As those who participate in God's promise [...] we cannot accept our situation as it is, but our commitment is that of challenging the forces of dehumanisation and oppression in our expectation of the Kingdom of God. (p. 23)

This articulation of eschatology aligns with the already-not-yet paradigm, in which the coming future is not passively awaited but actively struggled for in the present.

Kritzinger (1987:15) reinforces this understanding, arguing that liberation does not simply emerge but must be realised through human action in history: 'Liberation does not fall from the sky but is realized in and through human action in history'. By emphasising that Azania must be brought into existence through praxis, Goba disrupts theological tendencies that treat eschatology as a passive expectation. Instead, his eschatology demands engagement in historical processes of liberation, resisting both political accommodationism and theological quietism.

Goba's invocation of Azania as an eschatological horizon represents a radical reconfiguration of theological hope. By rejecting Western eschatologies that defer liberation, he affirms an Africanist vision in which eschatology is inseparable from historical struggle. His framing of Azania as the fulfilment of black self-determination aligns with the Azanian Africanist tradition, which insists on liberation as the condition for genuine eschatological fulfilment.

Kritzinger's framing of black eschatology as a historical in-between – stretching from 1652 to the realisation of justice – further reinforces the central argument: Azania is not simply a political concept but an eschatological signifier of black liberation. Goba's eschatology therefore is not a distant theological hope but an urgent and lived commitment to realising the new society of Azania in history.

The church as an eschatological community

Bonganjalo Goba's theological vision assigns a central role to the church as a community that actively participates in the realisation of God's liberating future. In his eschatological framework, the church is not merely an institution of worship or moral guidance but a historical agent of transformation. He envisions the church as a body that is called to embody the eschatological promise of Azania, making it a concrete reality rather than a deferred hope.

For Goba, the church is an eschatological community precisely because it exists between the present conditions of oppression and the anticipated future of liberation. This understanding aligns with the already-not-yet paradigm in eschatology, where the church must act as a foretaste of the coming order, resisting systems of dehumanisation while embodying the values of the liberated society to come.

This section explores three key dimensions of Goba's conception of the church as an eschatological community. Firstly, it examines his insistence that the church must actively participate in liberation, rejecting complicity in oppressive structures. Secondly, it considers his argument that the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, serves as a prophetic sign of God's future. Finally, it engages his critique of false reconciliation and the church's role in resisting narratives that obscure historical injustice.

The church as a historical agent of liberation

For Goba, the church must take an active stance against oppression, refusing neutrality in the face of injustice. He asserts that those who participate in God's promise cannot passively accept their situation but must engage in historical struggle. In Goba's (1988) words:

As those who participate in God's promise [...] we cannot accept our situation as it is, but our commitment is that of challenging the forces of dehumanisation and oppression in our expectation of the Kingdom of God. (p. 23)

This framing rejects the notion that the church's mission is limited to personal piety or spiritual salvation. Instead, it positions the church as an active force in history, tasked with challenging structures of oppression that hinder the realisation of the eschatological future.

Kritzinger reinforces this understanding, arguing that liberation is not simply given but must be realised through human action in history. Kritzinger (1987:15) writes, 'Liberation does not fall from the sky, but is realized in and through human action in history'. This means that eschatology, in Goba's theology, is not a passive expectation but a praxis-oriented commitment. The church, as a community of faith, is called to embody and enact this commitment by actively working towards the realisation of Azania.

The church as a prophetic sign of the coming kingdom

Goba's theological vision of the church is deeply pneumatological – he insists that the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, must function as a liberating sign of hope. Goba (1981) observes:

The Church in the power of the Holy Spirit is a liberating sign of hope [...] The powers of the Spirit are the powers of life, which determine the present, extending their influence forward to the future of the new life. (p. 57)

Here, Goba aligns with liberation theology's emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the power of transformation. His claim that the Spirit's presence 'extends forward to the future' reinforces

the already-not-yet nature of eschatology, where the Kingdom of God is both anticipated and embodied in the present through the actions of the faithful.

By framing the church as a Spirit-empowered agent of history, Goba challenges traditional ecclesiologies that emphasise institutional preservation as opposed to active participation in liberation. Moreover, his articulation of the church as a 'sign of hope' positions it as a prefigurative community – a body that enacts the values of the coming Azania even in the midst of oppression. In this way, the church does not simply preach about liberation; it embodies the liberating future in its communal life and political witness.

Resisting false reconciliation: The church's prophetic critique

A crucial dimension of Goba's eschatological vision is his rejection of false reconciliation, particularly in the context of South Africa's political transition. Writing on the eve of the 1994 democratic transition, he warns against the temptation to embrace narratives of peace that obscure the historical continuity of oppression. In Goba's (1994) words:

At a time when most of our people are killed in black communities, we hear deceptive claims about peace. And yet the structures of violence represented by the military continue to promote havoc and destruction. (p. 8)

This critique aligns with the Azanian Africanist rejection of the 'conqueror's peace', which argues that South Africa's negotiated settlement did not dismantle settler-colonial structures but reconfigured them under new terms. As Sithole (2024) observes:

[T]here was enough purpose in the negotiations to give a constitutional guarantee to the settler-colonial arrangement through a property clause. This means the latter is the order of things and creates the impression that it is in the interest of everyone. (p. 51)

Sithole's insight reinforces Goba's warning against 'deceptive claims about peace' by demonstrating how the negotiated transition did not fundamentally alter the structures of conquest but instead provided them with new legal legitimacy. The illusion of peace, then, functioned as a mechanism to preserve existing power relations while presenting them as a collective national interest. For Goba, this underscores his insistence that the eschatological promise of Azania cannot be realised through superficial reconciliation.

The Marikana massacre provides a stark example of how structural violence continues under the guise of post-apartheid peace. Sithole (2020:231) argues that, 'the Marikana massacre is structural violence having to assume its raw form of naked violence' and that this violence is, 'obviously targeted at the designated group of black subjects'. He further warns against treating Marikana as an isolated event rather than a manifestation of foundational injustices. Sithole (2020:231) writes, 'To regard Marikana as an event is to absolve structural violence, which is foundational and constitutive to the Marikana massacre'. Sithole's analysis

reinforces Goba's contention that the structures of violence remain intact despite claims of peace. The massacre of mine workers demanding a dignified wage exposed the persistence of state violence against black people, demonstrating that post-1994 South Africa retained the logic of conquest, merely under a different political configuration.

The church therefore must resist complicity in legitimizing such false narratives. Instead, it must remain a prophetic witness – a community that continuously names and resists the structural continuities of oppression. The church's eschatological role therefore is not to pacify struggles for justice but to insist on the ethical and theological necessity of dismantling the structures of conquest.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Bonganjalo Goba's historical awareness shapes his theology as an Africanist theology, specifically through his recognition of conquest as the foundational injustice and his articulation of Azania as an eschatological horizon. By engaging Goba's thought within the framework of an Azanian Africanist critique, this study has demonstrated that his theology resists theological complicity in settler-colonial arrangements and instead aligns with the ongoing struggle for black liberation. The study has further situated Goba's theological vision in conversation with Joel Modiri and other Azanian thinkers, reinforcing his rejection of Western eschatologies that defer justice rather than actively engaging in historical transformation.

The study developed this argument across three key sections:

- **Azanian Africanist tenets:** *Azanian Africanist critique provides the epistemological framework for assessing Goba's theological vision, centring historical awareness, race as a political category and epistemic autonomy as key elements in the Azanian mode of critique.* This is significant because it provides the analytical foundation through which Goba's work is interpreted, ensuring that his theological reflections are not merely understood as an isolated project but as part of a broader black intellectual tradition committed to dismantling settler-colonial thought structures.
- **Goba's Historical Awareness - a focus on conquest and continuity:** *Goba's recognition of conquest as the structuring force of black oppression aligns his theological project with an Azanian Africanist critique that rejects settler-colonial amnesia and insists on historical continuity in the analysis of black suffering.* This is crucial because it situates black theology in direct confrontation with the origins of injustice rather than treating apartheid as a singular event. By framing conquest as the defining condition of black existence, Goba's theology challenges any reconciliationist discourse that obscures the structural foundations of oppression.
- **Goba's eschatology - Azania as an eschatological signifier:** *Goba's theological vision treats Azania not as a mere political aspiration but as an eschatological horizon, resisting Western eschatological frameworks that depoliticise*

faith and deferring liberation to an otherworldly realm. This underscores the necessity of embedding black theological reflection within historical struggle. Goba's eschatology is not a passive hope but an active commitment to the realisation of justice, positioning black theology as a mode of intervention rather than resignation.

This study's engagement with Goba's theology contributes to black theological discourse today by reaffirming the necessity of historical consciousness in theological reflection. In an era where the structures of conquest continue to shape black life, whether through economic dispossession, state violence or epistemic marginalisation, Goba's thought challenges black theology to remain politically engaged and attuned to the unfinished work of liberation. His articulation of Azania as an eschatological horizon resists accommodationist theological tendencies, calling instead for a faith that actively seeks the dismantling of settler-colonial structures. By reclaiming Goba's thought through an Azanian Africanist lens, this study affirms the ongoing relevance of black theology as a site of resistance and historical intervention.

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CRedit authorship contribution

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