

## FOREWORD

### Tracing the Footsteps of Eku and Nwanyeruwa to Women's War of Liberation

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In their article, “The Christ for African Women,” Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah tell the story of Eku, a woman leader of the Akan. She led her people, fleeing the enemy during the war time. The enemy sometimes poisoned the water. Arriving at a water point, a tired and thirsty people, were afraid to drink water lest they fell into the enemies’ trap. Eku tasted the water on behalf of the people, and they watched her for a while to be sure that she will survive. When Eku did not die, people knew that they had been saved by their leader, who took the risk of dying for them. In this story Oduyoye and Amoah present Eku as playing the role of a savior, a Christ. This contextual and feminist Christological construction is radical for it presents Jesus as both black and female. In her books, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands*; and *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, anthropologist Ifi Amadiume fieldwork-based research has shown how western anthropologists-imposed dualism and hierarchical gender structures on west African cultures, that constructed its gender in a flexible and inclusive way—not relegating women to powerlessness nor to the private space. She documents how West African cultures constructed women as traders, who owned the marketplace, where man could only engage women as agents if they wanted to sell anything (think of malls and the stock market as 100% female space!).

Amadiume shows how Western colonial agents and structures conspired to coup African women from their social space into sub-ordinates of their male counterpart. The colonization of Africa was also a process of its patriarchization. This sad fiat was accomplished, not only through patriarchal writings of western anthropologists and missionaries, but also through the introduction of schools and churches, which promoted male

leadership and jobs, while denigrating cultural spirituality (Goddesses) that empowered women to excel in their public roles as farmers and traders. As Amadiume records, Nigerian women, under the leadership of Nwanyeruwa, went to war in 1929. They were fighting for their rights to be African women. This West African theological volume seeks to trace the footsteps of Eku and Nwanyeruwa in the quest for liberation. The act of retracing Eku and Nwanyeruwa's footsteps is a process of reclaiming African women's space. It is to undertake a war of liberation against patriarchy and colonial knowledge systems that have subjugated African women. It calls for a new feminist theory of analysis for African women.

This volume, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, is one of the three regional volumes commissioned in preparation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (henceforth Circle) return to its place of birth in July 1-5, 2024. The volumes rose within the context of preparing to produce biographies of the founding members of the Circle, when more members of the Circle expressed interest to write than the volume on *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers* could accommodate them. Regional volumes, exploring theologies generated by African women scholars, thus came into being, using one call for papers, which was regional specific and which has now constituted the foreword for each volume. The three regional volumes focus on exploring South, East/Central and West African women's liberation theologies generated since the launch of the Circle in 1989.

These volumes are:

- *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, edited by Seyram B. Amenyedzi, Yosi A. Maton, and Marceline L. Yele;
- *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Theologies of Liberation*, edited by Loreen Maseno, Esther Mombo, Muke Najagu and Veronica K. Kahindo;
- *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa*, edited by Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Gabaitse, Dorothy Tembo, and Fundiswa Kobo.

In addition to three regional volumes, the idea of producing thematic volumes was also birthed. The Circle thus commissioned continent and diaspora wide thematic volumes, focusing on ethics, philosophies, African Indigenous Religions, legendary African women, and Earth in African

women's literature. The Circle also launched a creative writing volume, to engage its non-academic members and audiences on current environmental challenges, facing Mother Earth. All the volumes mark the journey back to Ghana, within which *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* is located.

## **Background to Sankofa 2024 Journeys**

In 1989, 69 African women gathered at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. She had spent more than a decade searching for women in religion or theology, be it in the academy, the faith spaces, or both. Oduyoye had noticed that while women were dominant members in religious gatherings and cultural practices, there were hardly there in the leadership of faith institutions and academic departments of religion. African archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, professors, and academic Doctor of Religion were largely men. The absence of women from both the academic theological space and the leadership space of believers had consequences on the lives of women and female children. Male-generated interpretations of cultures and scriptures were often used to oppress, exploit, and keep women as sub-ordinated and second-class citizens in their families, communities and nations. An International Committee of eight chaired by Mercy A. Oduyoye and consisting of Betty Ekeya (Kenya); Rosemary Edet (Nigeria), Sr Bernadette Mbuy Beya (DRC), Elizabeth Amoah (Ghana), Brigalia Bam (South Africa); Rose Zoe Obianga (Cameroon) and Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya) assisted with planning for the conference in 1988 (Kanyoro, 2012:22).

Oduyoye and the planning committee thus gathered 69 African women from almost every African country (where they could be found) and from all religions and cultures to challenge this scenario. Sisters from the African diaspora were also invited. It was a launch of a transformative African female intelligentsia space with a clear agenda. The quest was to generate cultural and religious-based interpretations that embrace and empower all genders. Women from all religions and cultures were thus invited to enter the space of researching, reading, interpretation and re-interpreting the cultural/scriptural texts with the purpose of interrogating

and exposing oppressive aspects, as well as to generate liberating interpretations that affirm all members of the Earth Community. The Circle was thus launched in 1989 with a clear agenda for women to research, read, interpret, write, and publish in the area of cultural/religious texts for the liberation and empowerment of women in particular, and the whole Earth Community overall. Since women in religion were seriously lacking, mentoring became an important strategy for building the capacity of African women in the academy and in leadership of faith-related institutions.

The first research period (1989-2002) of the Circle was characterized by building its capacity and interrogating how religions/cultures construct and impact women, as well as finding ways of re-interpreting religions for the empowerment of women. In the second research period (2002-2019) the Circle focused on religions/theology/cultures and HIV&AIDS, as well as capacitating Faith-Based Communities for a constructive response, given the gravity of the HIV&AIDS epidemic on the African continent, and to African women and children, in particular. At its recent Africa-wide conference (July 2019), the Circle decided to adopt the theme of *Religions/Theology/Culture, the Environment and Sustainable Development Goals*. This theme was building on the conference theme; namely, Mother Africa: Mother Earth and Religion/Theology/Ethics/Philosophy. Eight volumes co-edited from the conference proceedings, are listed in the reference below.

It needs to be mentioned here that Covid 19, which appeared in the global community by the end of 2019, was unforeseen, unplanned for and a major disruption and health threat to African women, people and the world at large. The adopted theme of the Circle was not only put on a halt by Covid 19, but the Circle also had to apply itself to a new critical context and its impact on women. Towards this end three books were embarked; two of which were published (Hadebe, et al., 2021 & Labeodan, et al., 2021) while the third one is still forthcoming. Notably the huge and shocking impact of Covid 19 has come to shape the research focus of the Circle, for the executive committee decided that the theme for the forthcoming conference in Ghana will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion*.

## **Sankofa 2024: Thirty-five Years Later**

In July 2024, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians continental conference will therefore, return to Legon, Ghana, where the Circle was first launched in 1989. In accordance the 2019 chosen theme and the impact of Covid 19, research focus will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion*. This will be the first return of the whole Circle to its birthplace since the 1989 launch. Dubbed *Sankofa 2024*, the return will be an intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage to reconnect and recommit ourselves to our quest for justice-oriented knowledges and communities. Sankofa is a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol represented by a bird stretching its neck back to groom its tail. “The Sankofa symbolizes people’s quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, intelligent and patient investigation. It is this wisdom in learning from the past which ensures a strong future.” In preparation for this return, the Circle seeks to carry a comprehensive (in depth and thorough) assessment of what the founding members and their handmaidens achieved since 1989 in order to map the way forward. The term handmaidens here refer to those African women theologians and faith leaders, who did not make it to the 1989 launch meeting, who nonetheless received and implemented the vision of the Circle with vigor in its first two decades.

This volume, therefore, sought to research, analyze, map, interpret, re-interpret, expand, and theorize, among others, the theological works, ideas, and perspectives produced by the founding matriarchs and the handmaidens of the Circle: What kinds of interpretations and theologies of liberation did they generate? What sources did they use? What kinds of theories did they generate? How were their theologies of liberation constructed? What kind of Christology/ies, ecclesiology/s or missiological models did they propose? What hermeneutics did they generate and utilize? What has been the impact of the theological/ethical/philosophical ideas that they generated? How did they impact faith and the academic spaces? What pedagogical techniques did they generate and employ? What was the distinct contribution of the Founding Matriarchs and their Handmaids to the world? How does the work of funding mothers and handmaidens of the Circle address patriarchy, colonialism, neocolonial-

ism, tribalism, ethnic poverty, violence, religious difference, age, sexuality, and disability in their constructions of liberating theologies? Papers in this volume seek to address some of these questions, by engaging each author to focus on a particular theologian's work.

Unlike the short papers for the biographies volume, *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers*, the three regional volumes sought longer papers that enable deeper analysis to highlight the contributions of individual theologians and faith leaders. This volume therefore focuses on those women who made theological contributions through their research and publications or provided leadership in faith-related and ecumenical spaces. It does not seek to cover all women theologians; rather, it features those whose theological contributions are especially significant. The aim of this volume, therefore, is to make sure that by the July 2024 Ghana gathering regional contributions have been researched and published to map the way forward. Given this background, the statement of the problem, goals, specific objectives and research questions of this regional volume (which are the same as other regional volumes) are stated below.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Whereas in 1989, African women launched the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, seeking to develop a theology that flies with two healthy wings, up to now, the Circle has not carried a comprehensive analysis of the theology/ies produced by African women. The Circle, up to now, has not comprehensively asked evaluative questions, but it is now the agenda of this volume (and its sister volumes) to ask the following questions: How was a theology of two wings produced? What did it seek to do? How does it fly with two wholistic wings, better than other alternatives? How has it contributed to the African male-dominated theologies, feminist theologies, and theologies of the Global South? What, in other words, are the effects, achievements, strengths, and weakness of African women theologies of liberation?

## **Goal**

The volume, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* seeks to thoroughly investigate the theology/ies generated by the Circle matriarchs of West Africa and how they contributed towards theologies of liberation in the region, continent, and the world by focusing closely and analytically upon each theologian's work. In so doing, this volume becomes an important part of mapping an African feminist liberative historiography in theology.

## **Specific Objectives**

*Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* (through its authors) seeks to deeply research theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of West Africa by:

1. Investigating the historical/cultural/economic/religious **contexts** that motivated their work.
2. Highlighting the **sources**, they used to generate their theological ideas (stories? scriptures? cultures?).
3. Discussing specific features and **uniqueness** of the theology of a particular matriarch.
4. Discussing the **purpose** of the Matriarch's generated theological thinking.
5. Investigating how the proposed theology **addresses** patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, tribalism, sexual and disability-based discrimination among other social factors.
6. Analyzing how the Matriarch's theology **converses** with (a) African male theologians, (b) Global South theologies, and (c) Western feminist theologians.
7. Highlighting each essay's **main strength and contribution** to the world of knowledge and liberation.
8. Discerning its **potential applications** to the future world and work.

## Research Questions

To meet the above goal and its specific objectives, the volume *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* seeks (through its authors) to address the following research questions:

1. What were the theological **contexts** that informed this theological Matriarch's work?
2. What are the theological **sources** used by this matriarchal work (personal narratives? Scriptures? Culture)?
3. What are the particular **characteristics/themes** of this particular Matriarch's theology?
4. What is the purpose of her **theology**, and what does it seek to achieve?
5. How do her theological ideas **challenge and transform** patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, tribalism, agism, sexual and dis/ability-based discrimination etc.?
6. How does this theology **converse** with African male theologians and Western feminist theologians?
7. What are the main **strengths and contributions** of this theology to the larger world of knowledge?
8. How is the theology generated **applicable** to our future world and work?

## Conclusion

The *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* volume is in the same family as some of the earlier books of the Circle such as Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women Theologies* (2001); Nyambura Njoroge and Musa W. Dube eds., *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African* (2001); Susan Rackozzy, *In her Name: Women Doing Theology* (2004) among others. Yet this volume is unique in the sense that 35 years since African women's theology was officially launched in Ghana, the best that was produced during these decades is being analyzed and presented to the world, as well as pointing to the future (Yafeh-Deigh, 2021). The book also belongs to the same league with African male theological books such as:



Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (2009); Benezet Bujo & Ilunga Muya eds., *African Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (2005) which are notable for ignoring African women's voices in the theological arena. *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, on the other hand, factors both inculturation and black liberation theologies while bringing in gender, race, class, sexuality, diaspora, health, Earth and postcoloniality to present a more inclusive and more social-justice responsive African theology.

Within the global context, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* finds great company among such books as: Stephanie. Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*; Mary McClintock and Sheila Briggs, *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (2011); Kwok Pui Lan *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (2000); Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (2001); and Maria P. Aquino's, Daisy Machado and Jeanette Rodriguez's, *Religion and Justice: A Reader in Feminist Theology* (2002) among others. The volume, in other words, will be most welcome among Western, Asian and Latin American feminist and womanist liberation theologians. Its place in various theological families should render it a markable addition to the various readers in the whole Global South and the western world. Many students and libraries should find this a useful book for their classes and research.

Lastly, the volume *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* recognizes the cultural theological roots of west African landscape and seeks to celebrate the founding matriarchs and handmaidens of the region and to map the way forward. While this preface maps out the broad agenda of the Sankofa 2024 volumes, the editors through their introduction and the individual chapters will tell the story of the road covered in this journey from 1989 to the Sankofa 2024 pilgrimage and beyond. Through analyzing the various chapters, the editors' introduction will map for us themes, methods, theories, major contributions, strengths, weaknesses, and gaps gleaned from the theological feminist historiography of West Africa. Their introduction will highlight how the goal, specific objectives and the research questions are addressed by the volume. In so doing, they will point the whole Circle to the areas that need further consolidation and new explorations.

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