

**Phiri, Isabel Apawo**

Preface I

**In:**

Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Eds.), *Nehanda : Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa (Circle Jubilee Volume 3)*, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, S. 11-15. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

**Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion**

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96483

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

**Rechtehinweis:**

Dieses Werk ist durch das Urheberrecht und/oder die Angabe einer Lizenz geschützt. Es steht Ihnen frei, dieses Werk auf jede Art und Weise zu nutzen, die durch die für Sie geltende Gesetzgebung zum Urheberrecht und/oder durch die Lizenz erlaubt ist. Für andere Verwendungszwecke müssen Sie die Erlaubnis der Rechteinhaberinnen und Rechteinhaber einholen.

Für dieses Dokument gilt die **Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY**.



Die Lizenzinformationen sind online verfügbar:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## PREFACE I

*Isabel Apawo Phiri*

It gives me a lot of joy to write a preface to this publication entitled *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa* as part of the Circle of African Women Theologians' preparation for its 6<sup>th</sup> Pan African conference in July 2024. Having been privileged to participate in the launch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in September 1989, I feel highly favoured to be included in this publication. As a young University of Malawi lecturer who was also a youth Commissioner of the World Council of Churches Programme on Theological Education Commission, 1989 was a moment of 'conversion' when I heard Mercy Amba Oduyoye explain about the need for a 'Two-Winged Theology' in Africa. My eyes were opened to the reality that patriarchy is not God's will for African women but a result of the Fall of humanity. That understanding brought new inspiration to seek change in all areas of my life where patriarchy was manifesting itself. I was on a mission to inspire others with this liberating message by establishing Circle chapters wherever I lived in South Africa, Malawi and Namibia.

This publication follows the methodology of intergenerational conversations on the developments and contents of Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa. The publication foregrounds the reality that African women theologians in Southern Africa are asking different questions about their faith depending on how they experience their culture, politics, economy, and religion. Even within one country, one notices that there are different theologies based on gender, culture, race, class, and political and economic environment. Even within the work of one theologian from Southern Africa, there is a progression taking place all the time. Engaging the writings of the chosen women demonstrate this change. Despite the fact that the concentration of the women theologians in Southern Africa is not balanced, there has been an admirable attempt by the editors and authors to engage women theologians from many countries in Southern Africa. It is this diversity that makes the book interesting to engage with.

## The Development of African women's theologies in Southern Africa before the Circle

While the focus of this publication is connected to the period that starts with the launch of the Circle in 1989, the title of this book, evokes the spirit of Nehanda as an acknowledgement of the matriarchs of the past who have shaped the women's theologies in Southern Africa. This is an acknowledgement that the Circle in Southern Africa stands on the shoulders of powerful matriarchs who symbolise spirituality of resistance. Two other names that we need to evoke are Kimpa Vita (1684-1706) and Alice Mulenga Lenshina (1920-1978).

Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita was from the Kongo Empire, present day Angola. She was from the royal family who was converted to Catholicism. Despite the patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, she demonstrated the spirituality of resistance by preaching a different type of gospel from that of the Roman Catholic Church. When she faced resistance from the church, she started her own movement which combined politics and religion. She was ahead of her time and saw the connection between the church and colonial powers. She believed in liberation of Kongo from slavery. She believed that Jesus Christ was black. Although the Roman Catholic Church priests had her burnt to the stake together with her child, in her one sees the birth of African women's liberation theology from Southern Africa marked by a spirituality of resistance and sacrifice.

Alice Mulenga Lenshina (1920-1978) was a Zambian woman who headed the Lumpa Church. Originally, she belonged to the Free Church of Scotland. Through direct revelation, she responded to God's call to start her own church which had a huge following. In the politics of Zambia, she is mostly known in history as the leader of the "Lumpa Uprising of 1964", which was a conflict between members of her church and the new government of Kenneth Kaunda and its United National Independence Party (UNIP). For African women's theologies in Southern Africa, she is known for resisting polygamy and cultural practices that demean women. She protected poor people and especially women. She embodied a spirituality of resistance from political and spiritual male domination of women and stands as one of the first feminists of the soil.

The spirituality of resistance is also seen in the women's voice at the 1984 Black theology conference, which was held in Cape Town. The women delegates made it known that women feel oppressed in the communities and in church and demanded that the socio analysis of Black theology

ought to take this context of the oppression of women seriously. They refused to postpone solutions to women's problems to post-apartheid South Africa because the liberation of women from patriarchy is as important as national liberation. These views saw their way to the final statement of the conference.

The message of the women was further repeated at another Institute of Contextual Theology feminist conference held at Hamanskraal in the same year, 1984. At this conference, women made it clear that Black theology cannot be a liberation theology if it does not take the liberation of women seriously. The women emphasised the need for Black Theology to create space for women to participate on an equal basis. They also argued that all meaningful liberation theologies in South Africa should be aiming for a non-racist and non-sexist new South Africa.

## **The Development of African women's theologies in Southern Africa after the launch of the Circle**

After the launching of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Ghana in 1989, Brigalia Bam, the then General Secretary of the South African Christian Council, attempted to form a South African National Circle in 1991. The participants were both from the black and white communities. There was a big difference in the class of the participants in that all the black women were lay church workers (except myself, who was then a PhD student at the University of Cape Town) and all the white women were from the academic world in South African theological departments at universities and theological institutions. Although the Circle issues of research and writing on women's experiences in the church and society were raised, it did not take root. This was a disappointment to the Circle because; its policy is to have a Circle that is inclusive of all races and religions. Its definition of an African woman theologian is inclusive of both lay and ordained women as long as they are willing to write and reflect on their experiences of God in the context of Africa.

Therefore, despite the failure to have a South African national Circle, in 1991, the Cape Town chapter of the Circle was born in the Department of Religious Studies and the University of Cape Town. It eventually moved from the university to the community. The Cape Town Circle has always been unique in that it has a mixed membership of white and black (South African Indians, Coloured and Indigenous Africans); South Africans, Malawians, Swazis, and Sothos; African Traditionalists; Christians,

Jews and Muslims. The Cape Town Chapter of the Circle is the first and longest surviving Circle in Southern Africa.

The Durban Chapter of the Circle was launched in 1997 and the Pietermaritzburg Chapter of the Circle was launched in 2001. The Pietermaritzburg Chapter of the Circle, though young, sent a delegation of nine women theologians to the Circle's fourth Pan African Conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2007. This was the largest delegation of Circle women coming from the same town in South Africa.

The Pretoria Chapter of the Circle hosted the Circle's fifth Pan African Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa in August 2013. The theme of the conference was "Transforming Faith Communities into Safe Space: Conversations on Gender, Health, Religion, Culture and Empire".

The Botswana Circle hosted the Circle's sixth Pan African Conference in Gaborone, Botswana in July 2019, under the theme 'Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination.

The Circle in Southern Africa has contributed three Circle General Coordinators as follows:

*Prof Isabel Apawo Phiri* (2002 to 2007)

*Dr Fulata Lusungu Moyo* (2007 to 2013)

*Prof Musa W. Dube* (2019 to 2024)

## **The Theologies of African Women Theologians in Southern Africa**

African Women's theologies are a critical, academic study of the causes of women oppression: particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. It is committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions both in African culture and religions.

African women's theologies take women's experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, and sexism, globalisation, just to mention a few.

It sees the need to include the voices of all women not just theologians because it acknowledges that the majority of African women are doing oral theology. Story telling is one of the powerful methodologies that African women have revived.

It promotes conversation with male theologians in its vision and struggle for African liberation from all forms of oppression. It is seeking a partnership and mutuality with men to the exclusion of all forms of violence against women. In various voices, it mentions the dangers that the institution of marriage brings to women through its cultural and biblical teaching. The tension is noted that African culture gives African women their identity and yet, it has elements in it that are life denying, which African women should reject.

It is committed to exposing the ideological base of Christianity and Islam that maintains and justifies the oppression of women. The tension is noted that, on the one hand Christianity and Islam are part of colonialism, racism and sexism, and on the other hand, the Christian gospel encourages the struggle for liberation and recognition of injustice in the church and society.

It focuses on the liberative potential of the religious texts which are seen and read from a woman's perspective to enlighten their role in the struggle for human dignity

The issue of HIV and AIDS became urgent for theology in Africa because of high prevalent rates as compared to other continents. It is for this reason that the Circle took it seriously from 2002 to 2019. Southern Africa has continued to be the region experiencing higher prevalence of HIV than others in Africa. Eswatini, Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa continue to be Southern African countries with higher prevalence rates of HIV. The adolescent girl continues to be at the top of the vulnerable populations, which is a concern to the Circle.

From 2019 Climate justice has become a key issue for the Circle as is the case in the whole world. Climate injustice will continue in the foreseeable future.

The world events are showing the Circle that we live in a rapidly changing world. Old issues keep reoccurring with new twists. The Circle needs to prepare itself to respond quickly to the rapidly changing world so that our contribution remains relevant. May our analysis of what has been written since the launch of the Circle in 1989 to the present help us retain our prophetic voice in a rapidly changing world.

May you be inspired afresh as you read this book.

*August 2023*