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Preface II : Journeys of Women in Religion and Feminist Theology in Southern Africa

**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. 17-26. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

**Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion**

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96484

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

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## PREFACE II

### Journeys of Women in Religion and Feminist Theology in Southern Africa

*Musa W. Dube*

This volume is one of the three regional volumes commissioned in preparation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth Circle) to 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, *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers*, could accommodate them. Regional volumes, exploring theologies generated by African women, thus came into being. The three regional volumes focused on South, East/Central and West African women's liberation theologies generated since the launch of the Circle in 1989.

These volumes are:

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

In addition to three regional volumes, the idea of producing thematic volumes was birthed. The Circle thus commissioned continent and diaspora wide thematic volumes, focusing on biographies, ethics, African Indigenous Religions, Legendary African women, Earth in African women's literature. It also launched a creative writing volume, to engage its non-academic members on environmental challenges, facing Mother Earth. All the volumes marked the journey back to Ghana, within which, *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa* falls.

## **Background to Sankofa 2024 Journeys and Nehanda**

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 doctors 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 have been co-edited from the conference proceedings, are listed in the reference of this preface.

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 new critical context and its impact on African women. Towards this end three books were embarked; two of which were published (Hadebe et al. 2021 and 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 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 to its birthplace since the 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, 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 Handmaidens to the world? How does the work of founding mothers and handmaidens of the Circle address patriarchy, colonialism, neocolonialism, 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 short papers for 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 actually 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 explored, researched and published to map the way forward. Given this background, the statement of the problem, goals, specific objectives and research questions of the 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

Named after Mbuya Nehanda, the Zimbabwean spiritual freedom fighter who died for the same, the volume reclaims the long-standing tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in Southern Africa. The volume, *Nehanda: Southern African Women's Theology of Liberation*, seeks to thoroughly investigate the theology/ies generated by the Circle Matriarchs of Southern 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 history in theology.

## Specific Objectives

*Nehanda: Southern African Women's Theology of Liberation* (through its authors) seeks to deeply research theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of Southern 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 Southern African theological landscape stretches from African Indigenous Religions, and their place for women in the form of its gender neutral-inclusive concepts of God; ancestors and priestly offices, to present day multi-religious contexts (Dube 2012:127-139). Hence legendary spiritual women such as Mbuya Nehanda offered public leadership to their communities, resisting both colonial and patriarchal structures. The Rain Queen of the Lobedu led her people for two centuries and many African Kings in Southern Africa paid tribute to her, due to her rain-making spiritual powers. Sangomas (spirit-mediums) and wosanas (rain dancers) and herbalists, found in most Southern African ethnic groups, were spiritual offices that included women. With the arrival of Christianity African women in Southern Africa still demonstrated their culturally based spirituality by rising to the occasion, against a new patriarchal religion, Christianity. We think of such women as Christina Nku (South Africa); Mai Chaza (Zimbabwe) and Alice Mulenga Lenshina (Zambia) who started and led massive African Independent Church movements, that sprawled beyond their native country boundaries, resisting both colonial and patriarchal oppressions. These women were amongst many southern African females, who started and led churches, both at national and local levels (Dube 2014:317-340).

In 1989, when Mercy Oduyoye called on African women to launch the Circle, women from South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi heeded the call and became founding matriarchs of the Circle. These included Brigalia Bam, Isabel Phiri, Gertrude Kapuma, Peggy Kabonde, Joyce Tsabadze, Omega Bula, among others. Many more who did not go, but who received the agenda of the Circle, became the champions of its vision. These include Denise Ackerman, Christina Landman, Madipoane Masenya, Puleng Lenka-Bula, Beverly Haddad, Sarojini Nadar, Isabel Mukanyora, Susan Rakoczy, Rachel Fiedler, Fulata Moyo, Musa Dube, Julie Claassens, Lilian Dube, Elna Mouton, among others. This volume recognizes the cultural theological roots of Southern 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 historiography of Southern Africa. In so doing, they will point the whole Circle to the areas that need further consolidation and new explorations.

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