

**41** BiAS - Bible in Africa Studies  
Exploring Religion in Africa 15

Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse,  
Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Eds.)

# NEHANDA

Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa  
(Circle Jubilee Volume 3)



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Bibel-in-Afrika-Studien

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Volume 41

Exploring Religion in Africa 15

edited by  
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University  
of Bamberg  
Press

**2024**

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der  
deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im  
Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de/> abrufbar.

Dieses Werk ist als freie Onlineversion über das Forschungsinformationssystem (FIS; <https://fis.uni-bamberg.de>) der Universität Bamberg erreichbar.  
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Herstellung und Druck: docupoint, Magdeburg  
Umschlaggestaltung: University of Bamberg Press  
Umschlaggraphik: Joachim Kügler  
Deco-Graphiken: Joachim Kügler  
Text-Formatierung: Irene Loch, Joachim Kügler

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<https://www.uni-bamberg.de/ubp/>

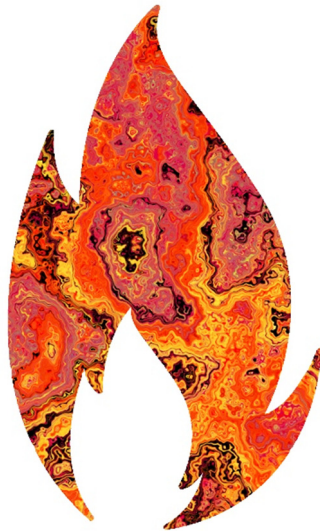
ISSN: 2190-4944 (Print)                      eISSN: 2750-0179 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-3-98989-000-8 (Print)            eISBN: 978-3-98989-001-5 (Online)

URN: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-951980  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-95198>

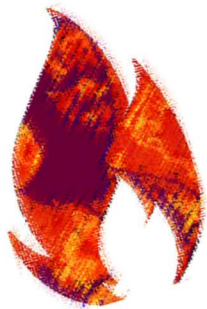
*Dedicated*  
to

**ISABEL APAWO PHIRI**

*A founding Member  
of the Circle, Trailblazer*



*Matriarch of Southern African Women's Liberation Theology  
Teacher of the Nations  
Ecumenist*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	9
PREFACE I <i>by Isabel A. Phiri</i> .....	11
PREFACE II <i>by Musa W. Dube</i> .....	17
INTRODUCTION <i>by Nelly Mwale &amp; Rosinah M. Gabaitse</i> .....	27

## SECTION ONE

1   Mbuya Nehanda's Legacy Fanning the Spirit of Anti-Colonialism.....	47
<i>Terence Mupangwa and Sophie Chirongoma</i>	
2   "Other Ways of Reading": Musa W. Dube and Postcolonial Feminist Reading of the Bible .....	67
<i>Mutale Mulenga Kaunda</i>	
3   Bosadi Theology of Masenya Madipoane (Ngwana 'Mphahlele) .....	85
<i>Lerato Mokoena</i>	
4   L. Julianah M. Claassens at the Theological Gate .....	97
<i>Funlola O. Olojede</i>	
5   A Critical Reflection of Isabel Mukonyora's Theological Works on the Masowe Concept of Liberation .....	111
<i>Faith Matumbu</i>	

## SECTION TWO

6   Christina Landman Theologizing with Herstories - The Theology of a Founding Matriarch of "The Circle" .....	123
<i>Lufuluvhi Mudimeli</i>	
7   Through the Eyes of Laughter: Fulata Lusungu Moyo's Theology.....	137
<i>Thandi Soko-de Jong</i>	
8   Getrude Kapuma's Narrative Theology of Pastoral Care: A Therapy for Trauma among Widows in Malawi .....	161
<i>Mwawi N. Chilongozi &amp; Mercy Chilapula</i>	
9   Theologising with Lilian Dube in Zi mbabwe and the Diaspora.....	175
<i>Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo</i>	
10   Doing Theologies of Survival with Beverly Haddad.....	189
<i>Rosinah Mwannana Gabaitse</i>	
11   Theologizing with Joyce Vilakati in the Eswatini Kingdom: A Feminist Critical Interpretation of Historical Texts .....	205
<i>Sonene Nyawo</i>	
12   Dennis Ackermann's Feminist Theology of Praxis: Formed in Lament.....	221
<i>Selena D. Headley</i>	

13 | Unshackling Bible Translations from Colonial Chains:  
Theologising with Dora Mbuwayesango in the Diaspora ..... 241  
*Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo*

14 | Theologizing in her Name with Susan Rakoczy ..... 255  
*Eze Chika*

SECTION THREE

15 | Talking Feminist, Talking back: Sarojini Nadar’s African Feminist  
Transdisciplinary Study of Religion..... 269  
*Megan Robertson*

16 | Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic:  
Reading the Engaged Scholarship of Sa’diyya Shaikh ..... 289  
*Mujahid Osman*

SECTION FOUR

17 | Women Theologies in Malawi: A Theological Narrative of a  
Matriarch, Isabel Apawo Phiri..... 307  
*Phoebe Faith Chifungo*

18 | Against the Odds: The story of Rachel Nya Gondwe Fiedler and  
its Theological Significance in Malawi..... 325  
*Chimwemwe Harawa*

19 | Theological Journeys of Omega Bula - A Zambian Theologian ..... 335  
*Nelly Mwale*

20 | The Theological Journey of Peggy Mulambya Kabonde: The First  
Female General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia..... 351  
*Bridget Nonde Masaiti-Mukuka*

21 | Tears do not mean Blockage to the Successful Bright Future:  
The Story of Felicidade Chirinda of the Presbyterian Church  
of Mozambique ..... 371  
*Elitha Moyo*

22 | Home and Homeless: Cheryl Dibeela Crossing Racial,  
Gender and Religious Boundaries ..... 391  
*Cheryl Dibeela @ Prince Dibeela*

Editors & Contributors ..... 411

AFTERWORD by **Joachim Kügler** ..... 417

BiAS series at University of Bamberg Press

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

On behalf of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth the Circle), the editors of this volume are grateful to the persons and structures of the circle which made this volume a success. Our gratitude firstly goes to the continental Circle coordinator, Prof Musa W. Dube, who provides academic leadership to the whole Circle and often functions as its principal investigator. Accordingly, she was the initiator of this book project, which she initiated in preparation of the Sankofa 2024 conference, which will be held in Legon Ghana in July 1-5, 2024. Prof Dube wrote the call for papers for this project, identified its editors and writers. She trained the editors, reviewed most abstracts with us and produced a review guideline for the full papers. She was also an ever-present consultant on various challenges that arose throughout the year of the project. We are grateful for her academic leadership and mentorship. We emerge empowered to provide academic leadership to the whole Circle.

We also want to thank the regional coordinator, Rev. Dr. Peggy Mulamba Kabonde, who was part of the journey at every step. Her constant checks on the progress of the volume were helpful in adhering to the timelines. The support of the national coordinators is also acknowledged and appreciated.

The editors also thank the authors and reviewers who contributed towards the quality of this book.

Finally, our gratitude goes to the editorial board of BiAS for welcoming our volume in their series, to Prof Kügler and Frau Loch for formatting and all their efforts to celebrate the Circle matriarchs with beautiful books. Thanks to University of Bamberg Press for accommodating this volume.

*The Editors*



## 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*



## 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 Handmaids 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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## | INTRODUCTION

*Nelly Mwale & Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse*

### **The Mandate of the Circle and It's Fulfilment in the Volume**

This introductory chapter maps the layout of the volume. Besides highlighting the main methods which have informed the chapters in the volume, it also uncovers the main contributions and features of theologies generated by women in the southern region as addressed by authors in this volume.

As an African baby born in an ecumenical surrounding, the Circle has grown with a marked presence in different spheres as informed by its mandate since inception. Kanyoro (1997:11) spells out the objectives of the Circle as follows:

The main objective of the Circle women is to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent. Research and writing for publication is our target and sole reason for being. Thus we are an academic group. We want to fill a gap in African women's profile as well as in theological writings from Africa.

With this clear objective, the Circle has been at the vanguard of historical resistance against oppressive structures and ideologies. One way in which this has been done is through theologising on issues of concern so as to amplify Pan-African and inter-religious theological perspectives of African women.

Emerging in a context characterised with dominant male theologies, the Circle has produced distinct African theologies (Dube, 1999; Masenya, 2000). As pointed out by Hadebe (2016), African theologies like other theologies elsewhere were the domain of male theologians which grew in the context of colonialism and certain missionary theologies that denigrated African cultures. Consequently, African female theologians questioned the tendency of many African male theologians to consistently portray African culture in a positive light with regard to its treatment of women while blaming colonialism and its capitalistic systems for women's experiences of oppression (Habebe, 2016:3). Additionally, theologies

of liberation generated by the matriarchs of the Circle have been grounded in culture. As stressed by Kanyoro (2002) and Oduyoye (1994), culture is central to theologising in the Circle such that cultural hermeneutics is appropriated as a first step towards African women's liberation theologies.

This volume, is therefore framed on the notion of theologies of liberation in order to show case women's contributions to liberation theologies in response to multiple oppressions in southern Africa. Anchored on Nehanda, the book is framed in the narrative of Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana, popularly known as Mbuya Nehanda (Grandmother Nehanda) who was a spirit medium and renowned for leading a rebellion against British occupation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Zimbabwe. This is to demonstrate resistance to all forms of oppression by the matriarchs and their handmaids in the Circle. Through this volume, authors resist different forms of oppression and demonstrate the active roles of African women in shaping the narrative of theologies of liberation. As per the indigenous teachings of the Shona that Nehanda, a powerful and revered ancestral spirit speaks through female mediums, authors in this volume speak through writing to celebrate the work of our Circle matriarchs and their handmaids. Authors also claim freedom from oppression, socio-economic, environmental and all forms of global injustices using the narratives of the Circle matriarchs and the theologies which have been generated by our matriarchs.

## **A Glimpse into Methodological Approaches**

Aware of the debates surrounding the notion of liberation theologies and African theologies (Maluleke, 1997), the volume approaches theologies of liberation as generated by African women theologians. In this regard, the focus is on African women theologians who have stood up to the silencing of their voices from theologising and ignored negative aspects of culture which characterised their experiences. In the words of Oduyoye (1995), African women had to construct their own theology. Accordingly, African Women theologians in the Circle have devised theologies and methods grounded in their local context. Among these methods are what Nadar (2012) identifies as storytelling. African women theologians take storytelling as a legitimate methodology and a powerful source of theology. Authors in the volume thus utilise diverse methodologies, including narrative research methodologies informed by both secondary sources

and primary sources of data in which story telling largely emerges as the dominant method. This affirms the understanding of the story or narrative in the Circle as a liberative tool as linked to the beading motif. As will be shown by Thandi de-Jong (in chapter 7), a beading motif is an African women's expression of their individual and collective *narrative* which stresses how the African women tell their stories and narrate their experiences as they bead, using each bead of unique colours. Both the telling and choice of the bead's colour and pattern in each bead finds its place as it is inspired by the ambiance, context, and safety of the space in which such beading is taking place. Habbad (2012) also includes storytelling as a key defining feature of African women theologies. She notes that the characteristics and foci of women's theologies include cultural hermeneutics, storytelling, the Bible, a communal theology, theological and social advocacy, a liberation trajectory, the intersection of gender with societal issues, a multi-disciplinary intention, an interfaith dimension and an emphasis on subjectivities and particular locations.

Besides employing narrative research, the authors also demonstrate how matriarchs and their handmaids in the Circle employed their own experiences of pain and patriarchal oppression as a means to theologise. This is captured not only with personal interviews with the matriarchs, but also through the analysis of documents in the form of publications done by the Circle matriarchs of interest which became the sources of data for analysis. This is important as the volume takes stock of the matriarchs' contributions to theologies of liberation in Southern Africa. The authors also show that theology should be experienced or lived, hence largely engage with theoretical frameworks centred on the theology of resistance or liberation as generated by the Circle matriarchs themselves in Southern Africa.

## **Major contributions and Features of Southern African Women Liberation Theologies**

Based on the research questions which the volume sought to address, this book showcases the contributions of the matriarchs to theologies of liberative as addressed in the four main thematic areas, namely, theoretical foundations for theologies of liberation, theologies generated by matriarchs, forms of resistance and the theological journeys of selected matriarchs.

The major contributions and features of Southern African women liberation theologies are highlighted in the four main parts of the book which mirror the range of studies at the centre of the Circle's research areas. Mombo (2003) notes that the range of studies undertaken by Circle members include Biblical and Cultural Hermeneutics; Religion in Pluralistic Cultures; Theological and Ministerial Formation for Women; and Women in Religion, which focuses on the stories of women and religion in Africa.

**SECTION I** (which is centred on the theoretical foundations of theologies of liberation) comprises five chapters. In this regard, *Chirongoma* and *Mupangwa* celebrate Mbuya Nehanda as a woman, who resisted white supremacy which eventually led to her execution, in **Chapter 1**. The duo shows that Mbuya Nehanda, a Zimbabwean spirit medium opposed and resisted the oppression of the indigenous Zimbabweans by the British colonial regime which ushered in discrimination, marginalization and the chockfull oppression of black people. These infractions propelled Mbuya Nehanda to lead a revolution against colonial rule and ignited the spirit of resistance. Her legendary statement, "my bones shall rise again", has continued to fan the spirit of resistance against colonial oppression in Zimbabwe and she has become one of the most celebrated matriarchies not only in the history of Zimbabwe's war of liberation but across Africa. The chapter argues that religion should never be used as a tool to silence the oppressed and the marginalized.

In **Chapter 2**, *Mutale Mulenga Kaunda* focuses on Musa Dube's African postcolonial feminist thinking. Pioneered in Africa by the scholars from the circle, Dube is one such pioneer who uses postcolonial theory for biblical interpretation in Africa. She has led the way in drawing from the postcolonial theory and interpreting the Bible in Africa in the light of the theory (Togaresei, 2016). Landman (2022:9) also celebrates Musa Dube by noting that the 21st century kicked off with at least two very influential publications by Circle members that let academics talk in different words about women's studies, one of which is *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Dube, 2000), after which nobody in theological academia, male or female, could publish on postcolonial interpretations of the Bible without quoting Dube. In the context of HIV and AIDS, Musa has done tremendous work too. It is for this reason that Ezra Chitando and Rosinah Gabaitse (2008) celebrate Musa's activism and biblical reflections on HIV and AIDS in Africa. Accordingly, Mutale Mulenga Kaunda purpos-

ively focuses on two key concepts/metaphors in Dube's postcolonial feminist theologies, and affirms Dube's African women postcolonial theologizing using a decolonial lens. She shows that Dube's other ways of reading the Bible recognise the potential of the bible having death dealing forces in Africa if not interpreted critically, especially for women, hence Dube's apt use of concepts/metaphors as alternative ways of reading the bible for fullness of life which contributes to liberative theologies generated in southern Africa. Musa's contribution to theologies of liberation goes beyond scholarship, but leadership and mentorship as she has mentored many people across the globe.

In **Chapter 3**, *Lerato Mokoena* explores Bosadi theology by Madipoane Masenya. Mokoena shows that the 1980s and 1990s are the formative years of gender-specific frameworks in biblical feminist interpretation and that scholars such as Masenya seized an ideological opportunity to jump-start Bosadi Theology as a matter of intellectual insurgency. The intellectual insurgency resulted from the lack of correct antagonistic grammar that Euro-feminist frameworks provided. There was no way they could fashion the nervous condition of being black and being a woman and banishment. Those imported frameworks were gaslighting black women unleashing scandalous and boundless violence, and making it impossible for black women to be interlocutors in this ideation space. Therefore, Mokoena exemplifies how Masenya played around the tensions of race, patriarchy, sexism, classism, and even colonialism and Apartheid to examine the social and intimate lives of black South African women through developing a liberatory framework of *Bosadi* Theology on the South African Biblical Studies scene.

In **Chapter 4**, *Funlola O. Olojede* pays attention to the work of Juliana Claassens with specific reference to the unique features of her theological work within the historical, socio-cultural, economic and religious context that motivated her approaches. Olojede demonstrates the development of Claassens' theological thinking and how she has navigated various issues of discrimination and prejudice that stem from patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, tribalism, sexual and disability-based, among other social factors, using diverse sources that include novels, films and music, besides Scriptures. By so doing, this chapter shows Claassens' main contributions to the world of knowledge and liberation as well as its potential applications to the future world and work.

*Faith Matumbu* wraps up Section I of the volume through her critical reflection of Isabel Mukonyora's theological works on the Masowe Concept

of Liberation in **Chapter 5**. Matumbu demonstrates that Mukonyora's theological work exposes the oppression during the colonial and post-colonial period in Zimbabwe. Through engagement with Masowe concept of liberation which is grounded in Isabel Mukonyoro's theological works, Matumbu argues that Mukonyoro's theology provides hope for redemption, a theology that tries to liberate the Shona people from the colonial hegemony and patriarchal thinking.

**SECTION II** of the volume (consisting of nine (09) chapters) draws attention to the specific theologies and theological methodologies generated by matriarchs in Southern Africa. *Lufuluw'hi Mudimeli* opens the section in **Chapter 6** by theologizing with Herstories through the lens of Christina Landman, a founding matriarch of the circle. Mudimeli shows how the contributions of Christina Landman through her theological works and perspectives, as well as her ecclesiastical participation impacted on South African faith communities and academic spaces. The author further shows that Landman, as the first South African woman to become a professor in theology, has trodden on the road less travelled and against all odds imprinted a mark on the South African soil and even beyond. Mudimeli argues that the main purpose of Landman's theology is to heal people from their pain as her theology is largely a theology of Narrative Compassion or a Theology of the Shared Story, one derived from people's stories and experiences, and not a theology that prescribes to people what their lives should be like. Landman's theology confronts patriarchy, colonialism, sexual discrimination as structural sins through the use of experiences/stories of people who suffer from these types of discrimination. Additionally, landman's theology has no gender as it invites dialogue between the binaries of male/female, Western/African etc, including everyone to share their pain with their oppressor and to enter dialogue with one another.

**Chapters 7 and 8** continue with narrative theologies. In **Chapter 7**, *Thandi Soko-de Jong* focuses on Fulata Lusungu Moyo's theology and shows that the work of Fulata Lusungu Moyo (a Malawian systematic and feminist theologian, as well as one of the founding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians) predominantly addresses religious and cultural influences on gender construction and women's sexuality. Through storytelling and humour that embody interpretations and theologies of liberation — against issues that dehumanise women, Fulata is an advocate for gender justice. Soko-de Jong also demonstrates that Fulata is also accredited with encouraging churches worldwide to adopt the

'Thursdays in Black' campaign against rape and violence during her tenure as Program Executive for Women in Church and Society at the World Council of Churches (2007 – 2019). Fulata's mission to help co-empower others and be a leading voice in discourses on justice, women and the church has inspired others, particularly young theologians and gender justice advocates.

In **Chapter 8**, *Mwawi N. Chilongozi* and *Mercy Chilapula* focus on Getrude Kapuma's narrative theology of pastoral care. The duo present Kapuma as a renowned woman theologian and an ordained minister in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Blantyre Synod in Malawi whose theology can be described as a narrative theology of pastoral care. Chilongozi and Chilapula show that Kapuma was a fearless crusader of women's rights in the Church as she has fought for the ordination of women in the Church and championed the cause of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. Additionally, the duo argue that Kapuma's theology is a narrative theology as she is committed to the theological significance of storytelling and the power of storytelling that brings healing to the traumatised and especially widows. Through her writing, Kapuma narrates the challenges that widows face from property grabbing to widow cleansing rituals and argues that the church has an important role of pastoral care to the widows as they are denied their human dignity and most of them suffer in silence. The authors conclude by arguing that the influence of her theology was far reaching as the Blantyre Synod had taken on board the narrative theology of pastoral care for widows while some congregations/churches were creating support networks for widows.

In **Chapter 9**, *Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo* theologises with Lilian Dube in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora. She demonstrates that Lilian Dube was the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Theology Degree from Stellenbosch University, South Africa and that Lilian Dube has championed the cause for gender justice and the emancipation and empowerment of African women. Her contributions have also been through scholarship which spans over decades of research in African Theology and Religion, Gender and Sexuality and the devastating gendered HIV and AIDS and several professional positions within the international arena. Hlatywayo further highlights Dube's quest for sensitive theologies that seek to negate and transform patriarchal bias that predisposes women of their spiritual and leadership capabilities.

While Hlatywayo draws our attention to sensitive theologies for transforming patriarchy, *Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse* in **Chapter 10** dwells on theologies of survival. Gabaitse shows that Beverly Haddad is a blend of three worlds, a woman, a priest and an intellectual-activist for women's rights and dignity. Gabaitse stresses that the contribution of Haddad to the theological and developmental discourse opposing the oppression and marginalization of African women is unquestionable. By this, Haddad was amongst the pioneers of women ordination in the Anglican Church, thus helping in the claiming of the right and place of women in the priesthood. She also spent years as an academic, teaching and researching in the area of women, church and development, with the aim of discovering the role of the church and theology in the empowerment of marginalized women both in the church and in society. Largely focused on what Sandra Pertek called "capturing the strength of survivors in coping with severity of exploitation", Haddad has contributed to the development of an appreciation of theology as a tool of building resilience in women's groups so as to transform them from victims of oppression to agents of freedom and liberation.

In **Chapter 11**, *Sonene Nyawo* uses five (5) selected works of Joyce Vilakati, a feminist literary critic who engages with historical texts to discover the hidden voices of women, whilst exposing patriarchal beliefs and stereotypes that relegate women to the periphery. Nyawo anchors the chapter on the recognition that Feminist critical readings manifest the injustices against women widely believed to be justified by the bible, whilst at the same time are an empowering force to women in families, church and in the entire society. As such, African women theologians in the Circle, using gendered lenses, have challenged the pervasive rhetoric that depicts African women as inferior, inexpressive and docile. These theologians are committed to magnifying the whimpering voices of African women victims and survivors of the patriarchal wrath, irrespective of their religious associations. Given that some of the Circle champions might have changed residence, and are in the other world, whilst others have aged to remember their contribution, Sonene argues that retrieving their insights is more to recognise that they still speak to our hearts and minds.

*Selena D. Headley* explores Dennis Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis formed in lament in **Chapter 12**. Headley shows that Dennis Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis was forged in lament. Soaked in the historic pathos of a brutal, dehumanising apartheid system which caused her to wrestle with personal and communal pain and trauma in

pathways of resistance, Ackerman rooted her theological pilgrimage in personal and collective experiences of suffering. Ackermann opted for an embodied spirituality in tension with the status quo of most faith communities, and thus engaged in activist scholarship immersed in the concerns of the marginalised and traumatised, struggling with the implications of the loss of lament for the faith community. Headley argues that Ackermann's contributions reflecting on individual and communal lament provide guidance of how to move toward the dream of God for a just society.

In **Chapter 13**, *Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo* explores the work of an Old Testament Studies and Biblical hermeneutics scholar, Dora Mbuwayesango. Using selected writings of Mbuwayesango which focus on her expertise in biblical hermeneutics, Hlatywayo shows Mbuwayesango's endeavour to unshackle colonial chains through adopting a postcolonial feminist approach to biblical hermeneutics, lobbying for the recovery of indigenous meanings of African languages, lobbying for interdisciplinary Bible translations and the decolonisation of the gods of Africa from the colonial heist.

In closing SECTION II of the volume, *Eze Chika* theologizes in Her Name with Susan Rakoczy in **Chapter 14**. Chika highlights that Susan Rakoczy is an emerita professor of systematic theology and spirituality at St. Joseph's Theological Institute and the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Although, she is American, she has lived many years in Africa, specifically in Ghana and South Africa. She has been an academic of high reputation, who has contributed great insight towards women doing theology, popularly reflected in the book she authored in 2004 titled: *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*. Chika also shows how Rakoczy provides in-depth discussion regarding origins and development of feminist theology and its interpretations in Africa and other continents. Rakoczy's thematic analysis of women's trusting experience, which is presented as the core of feminist theology and spirituality reflects how African women (including women across the globe) despite their experience of frustration in the face of patriarchy strive to flourish. Chika argues that Rakoczy presents an African woman as one who surmounts any experience of limitations presented to her via Christianity and traditional religion.

**SECTION III** (comprising 2 chapters) of the volume focuses on forms of resistance as demonstrated by selected circle matriarchs from different religious traditions. One of the forms of resistance is talking back. Thus,

in **Chapter 15**, *Megan Robertson* trails Sarojini Nadar’s African Feminist Transdisciplinary Study of Religion. The author recalls that Sarojini Nadar introduced her to the feminist idea of ‘talking back. She therefore traces the ways in which Sarojini Nadar has negotiated, shaped and challenged the study of faith and feminism – what she refers to as “the f-words” – in contemporary South Africa. Nadar’s contribution to the study of gender and religion is framed in relation to her analysis of violence in Biblical text, in church and public life, and in higher education. Through her scholarship and embodied work, Robertson argues that Nadar has created a toolkit for talking back to patriarchal and heteronormative power in these various spheres. Not only does Nadar provide young black African scholars of religion with crucial underpinnings from which to continue to talk back, but she also demonstrates *how* this can be done in socially just and transformative ways.

In **Chapter 16**, *Mujahid Osman* traces the Intersectional Islamic Ethic of Shaikh. Osman shows how in her incisive reading of Islamic and feminist traditions, South African scholar Sa’diyya Shaikh maps out the challenge of engaged intersectional scholarship constructing an analytic called “multiple critique.” Shaikh challenges and reconfigures the boundaries of tradition through the use of an analytical and methodological approach which is informed by three intersectional registers of intervention, disrupting rapacious normative configurations of social power, and suggesting capacious modes of being human. Osman examines three interconnected themes in Sa’diyya’s engaged scholarship – religious anthropology, sociality, and the Divine-human relationship in Islam – to show how an intersectional approach develops discourses of compassionate succour for marginal communities by exposing the inner workings of dominant structures of power and cultivating alternative modes of being human. By so doing, Osman represents Sa’diyya’s reimagining of tradition as that which exposes the hidden histories of Muslim women fighting against gender injustice. Through her engaged scholarship, Shaikh therefore presents a more capacious framing of religious anthropology that is not premised on structures of violence or secular ontologies, but rather filtered through an Islamic ethics of love, compassion, and human dignity and presents a new vision of community that is based on intersectional justice.

**SECTION IV** of the volume (with six chapters) focuses on theological journeys of selected circle matriarchs. The section starts with the theological journey of Isabel Apawo Phiri, to whom this volume is dedicated.

Isabel Phiri is well known for her work in gender justice, HIV and AIDS and African Theology. Isabel Apawo Phiri has a special place in the history [herstory] of the Circle in that she participated in the convocation of the circle in 1989. Additionally, when the circle became institutionalised, Phiri became the second general coordinator of the circle at the pan-African meeting in Addis Ababa 2002 (Musimbi Kanyoro was the first general coordinator). Phiri is further considered as the mother of the Circle in Malawi. She is an icon for gender justice which brought her in conflict with the powers that be. For example, upon presentation of research findings (conducted with three other women academics at the university of Malawi on Sexual harassment and rape on campus) in 1995, Phiri became a victim of violent attacks from students and staff for speaking on a topic that was considered as a taboo. This resulted in the stoning of their house, including damaging her office. She was also threatened with excommunication from her church for allegedly inciting other church women to seek gender justice. As a result, Phiri left Malawi for Namibia in 1996.

Phiri also had a successful academic career. For example, besides lecturing at the University of Malawi, and Zomba theological College, she also held a teaching position at the university of Kwazulu Natal where she also served as Dean of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics. She further served as an editor of the *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*. Phiri has also held numerous leadership positions. Apart from serving as the second general coordinator of the circle (2002-2007), Phiri also served as moderator of the World Council of Churches (WCC)' Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation. Furthermore, Phiri served in other roles within the WCC such as Associate General Secretary for public witness and Diakonia through which she focused on issues centred on racism, sexuality, climate change and justice. She is also renowned for her presentation to the United Nations in New York on the Plan of Action for religious Leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence in which she advanced that more women are needed in church leadership roles to prevent atrocity crimes. Phiri has also been featured in an exhibition on Faith in Gender Justice at the Scottish parliament with a famous quote 'Prophetic theology has turned me into an advocate for gender justice'. More recently, Phiri has been involved in the publications with the WCC on responding to the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In **Chapter 17**, *Phoebe Faith Chifungo* analyses the theological journey of Isabel Apawo Phiri and demonstrates how Phiri's journey has contributed towards the liberative theologies. Chifungo shows that Phiri has contributed to theologies of liberation through her publications where she has profoundly condemned all kinds of women oppression but also through her sharing of liberating and empowering ways to women by re-reading the Bible from their own perspective. She has also explored a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women, social inclusion and gender equality. Her profession and academic success as a professor are also a commendable contribution since both men and women have benefited from her liberative theological lecturing.

In **Chapter 18**, *Chimwemwe Harawa* recounts the journey of Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler and its theological significance in Malawi. Harawa demonstrates that the engagement of women in Theology is an endeavour which is not without a history and affirms that the birth of the Circle in 1989 has aided the development of theology. Harawa presents Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler as a second-generation member of the circle in Malawi from the Evangelical Church, the first members being members of the Central African Presbyterian Church (Isabel Apawo Phiri, Fulata Moyo and Getrude Kapuma). Harawa argues that the contributions of NyaGondwe Fiedler to theologies of liberation have largely been through her roles as an academician and a social worker demonstrated through her numerous publications of theological significance.

In **Chapter 19**, *Nelly Mwale* trails the theological journey of Omega Bula who is identified as one of the first cohorts of the Circle in Zambia, alongside Peggy Mulambya Kabonde and Juliet Matembo. In this chapter, which is also in honour of Omega Omega, who died on January 31, 2023, after a battle with cancer, Mwale shows that Bula's theological engagement was shaped by her historical, religio-cultural, and economic context, which negatively affected people's wellbeing, women, and the Earth. Bula's theological journeys were centred on fostering a theology which she termed a theology of the promotion of an economy of life in which scripture, stories and experiences were used as empowering tools for justice. Her theology was, among other things, aimed at fostering a just economic system which dignified people (in a context where the free-market system was based on domination and exploitation), working in solidarity with women within and outside the churches and promoting the church's response to the call for justice in the economy and the Earth in concrete ways. As such, her theology addressed capitalism, patriarchy,

the environmental crisis, and other related social factors in practical ways and contributed to generating liberative theologies.

In **Chapter 20, *Bridget Nonde Masaiti-Mukuka*** retrieves the theological history of Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde who was the first woman General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia and the regional coordinator of the Circle in Southern Africa. Identified by Omega Bula as an emerging African woman theologian, Mulambya-Kabonde was consequently appointed to attend the first inauguration of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Ghana. She is therefore a founding member of the Circle in Zambia. In this chapter, Masaiti-Mukuka shows how colonialism, power, patriarchy, culture, ageism, gender and religion intersects in the theological journey of Mulambya-Kabonde. By focusing on Mulambya-Kabonde as the first female General Secretary of UCZ, the author also highlights the theological challenges and achievements she encountered, including Mulambya-Kabonde's leadership role which has contributed greatly to building the capacity of some church members. Masaiti-Mukuka further demonstrates how Mulambya-Kabonde's theological ideas challenge and transform patriarchy, colonialism, gender, culture and the subordination of women in the church.

Apart from the theological journeys of matriarchs in Zambia, the section also delves into the journey of matriarchs in other countries. For example, in **Chapter 21, *Elitha Moyo*** narrates Felicidade Chirinda's life journey and notes that although Chirinda was not among the Circle Pioneers in Ghana in 1989, her work and contributions toward the objective of 1989 matriarchy group are testimonies of what she has done to women livelihoods of Mozambique. Moyo highlights that Chirinda's life journey portrays what could be termed a theology of leadership, centred on transformation. The author argues that through mentorship by Musa Dube and other matriarchs mingling with Chirinda, Chirinda was entirely transformed for the transformation of the communities where she worked within Mozambique and other countries. Moyo advances that the Circle's impact and influence grounded its roots in Mozambique, because of the fearless work of Chirinda. The leadership positions she held empowered Chirinda to work for the Mozambique Communities, including through the CIRCLE and AACC. Moyo also shows that Chirinda's life journey was full of challenges, but she walked and lived the denunciation of social and missionary historical context of oppression with the hope that one day, the church and society would reflect and liberate its members.

*Cheryl Dibeela and Prince Dibeela* wrap up SECTION IV in **Chapter 22**, in which Cheryl recounts her own journey on being home and homeless in relation to her crossing of racial, gender and religious boundaries. The duo explore the intersection of boundary-crossing, homelessness, alienation and in-between spaces with race, gender and religion as Cheryl has experienced it both in her adopted home in Botswana and her home of birth, which is South Africa. The authors show how marriage is an act of self-limitation for the woman, for it is them who must be uprooted and transported to a new culture, and sometimes a new country. It is the woman who should learn the new culture, who should say 'your people will be my people and your God will be my God.' Additionally, the chapter shows Cheryl's involvement in activism within and outside the Church circles and brings to light her ailment in September 2020 (in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic), which has seriously curtailed her functioning.

### **Notable Strengths**

The volume's strength lies in the attempt to consolidate the theologies generated by the Circle matriarchs and their handmaids through empirical engagement with their work. The chapters in the volume have either drawn on interviews with the matriarchs or publications (scholarly works) by the matriarchs themselves. In this way, the volume brings to life the voices of African women theologians and their engagement in various contexts.

Additionally, the national representation of the matriarchs covered in the volume affirms how women in the region have journeyed together to deal with issues which oppress humanity, including colonialism, religion, disease and culture among others. The volume also brings out the lived experiences of the matriarchs and their handmaids and points to the impact of these narratives to the wider society. By so doing, the volume also depicts the numerous roles played by the Circle membership at both local and global level.

With the Circle's mandate to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent, the work of the matriarchs and their handmaids in this volume is testimony to the commitment of the Circle to research on the effects of religion and culture on women's lives from the perspective of women and to produce theological texts that influence theological education into the future (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1990). For example, from the

early 2000s in the context of HIV and AIDS, the Circle rose to the occasion to formulate theologies that addressed the implications of the HIV epidemic on African women. As shown by Ayanga (2016), one of the main legacies of the Circle lays in giving voice to the voiceless as was the case in its earlier years by creating awareness of the plight of women on the ground, especially as far as HIV and AIDS were concerned, and by creating opportunities for women to undergo theological training.

The Circle matriarchs in the region have also led the way in designing theories that are grounded in the realities of the local context. For example, Masenya was the first black woman Old Testament scholar and designed her own theory, Bosadi, while Musa Dube is the second black New Testament scholar who is credited with having turned the corner of feminist biblical scholarship by bringing in the postcolonial feminist perspective. Women theologians in the region have also provided international and ecumenical leadership such as Omega Bula, Peggy Mulambya Kabonde, Isabel Phiri, Sarojini Nadar and many others. In short, our matriarchs have been leaders at both local and international levels and have continued to pass on the button to their handmaids. While numerous achievements have been recorded, the success stories have not been without challenges as they have had to fight patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, tribalism, ethnic poverty, violence, religious difference, age, sexuality, and disability in their constructions of liberating theologies.

The volume also stands true to the mentorship agenda of the Circle through the collaborative efforts of the Continental coordinator, Prof Musa Dube and the network of authors in the southern region. It is therefore a volume that is deemed significant to the academic, religious and secular society in the field of gender, religion, theology, development and sociology, among other disciplines.

## **Emerging Gaps**

Although this volume has attempted to bring to the fore the contributions of the Circle matriarchs and their handmaids to the generation of theologies of liberation, not all women have been covered. For example, among the members of the International Committee of eight chaired by Mercy A. Oduyoye, 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) who assisted with planning for the conference in 1988

(Kanyoro, 2012:22), the narrative of Brigalia Bam which should have formed part of this volume has not been included due to challenges among the authors who were assigned to cover her work.

Brigalia Bam's leadership contributions are acknowledged as she served as the General secretary of the South African Council of Churches and Director for the World Council of Churches sub-unit on women in Geneva before her return to south Africa. As well captured by Morrow (20 June 2018), Brigalia Bam is well known in South Africa as having served as the chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) from 1999 to 2011. She also previously served as secretary general of the South African Council of Churches. In a country that had recently been on the brink of racial civil war, she guided South Africans with humour, tolerance and impartiality along the path of inclusive democracy, states Morrow. Bam is further renowned for her role in advising on electoral matters in various African countries and promoting women's rights within and outside the church, including her rejection of racism. Starting her career as a teacher and social worker, Bam worked with the Young Women Christian Association in Natal Province in the 1950s and '60s where she sought to promote women's self-reliance in often deeply patriarchal communities. Having joined the World Council of Churches, she worked to build networks of Christian women; speak against the male domination that was characteristic of most churches; promote the ordination of women, and work for women's bodily as well as spiritual welfare 1967 to 1981. Bam stands out as a woman who fought for the liberation of women in the churches and beyond. Her contributions to the growth of African women theologies is also distinct through her assertion that 'if ever there was going to be a theology of liberation for women, woman had to reconstruct it. It would not come automatically even from the most radical of our theologies (Bam, 2005:10).

As a forward, attention could be given to the matriarchs and handmaids who have for one reason or the other not been captured in the three regional volumes.

## CONCLUSION

Anchored on Nehanda, to emphasise how the legendary spiritual woman, Mbuya Nehanda offered public leadership to the communities through resisting colonial and patriarchal structures, the volume sought to demonstrate how resistance in its different forms has been an ongoing initiative in the Circle. The resistance from African women through their work in the Circle not only affirms the spirit of Mbuya Nehanda, the Zimbabwean spiritual freedom fighter who died for the same, but also brings to the fore the long-standing tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in Southern Africa. The volume, *Nehanda: Southern African Women's Theology of Liberation* therefore remains significant for mapping an African feminist liberative history in theology as will be shown by different authors in the following chapters.

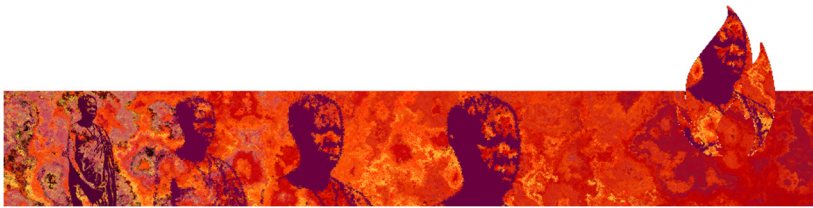
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# SECTION ONE



# 1 | Mbuya Nehanda's Legacy Fanning the Spirit of Anti-colonialism: Towards a Theology of Resistance and the Resurrection Motif

*Terence Mupangwa & Sophie Chirongoma*

## Abstract

Mbuya<sup>1</sup> Nehanda is a Zimbabwean spirit medium who opposed and resisted the oppression of the indigenous Zimbabweans by the British colonial regime. Zimbabwe was colonized by the British in the late 1880s. This ushered in racial discrimination, marginalization and the chockfull oppression of black people. Africans endured land appropriation, being deprived of rights such as access to education and the infringements of their freedom in all aspects of life. A cocktail of these infractions propelled Mbuya Nehanda to lead a revolution against colonial rule. She ignited the spirit of resistance, and her legendary statement, “my bones shall rise again”, has continued to fan the spirit of resistance against colonial oppression in Zimbabwe. This statement also has an affinity with the resurrection motif. Although in some Christian circles, resistance is considered an evil act, in this chapter, we proffer that the spirit of Mbuya Nehanda should spur all women of faith to boldly challenge and resist all systemic injustices. Informed by the theology of resistance and the resurrection spirit, we tender that women of this world should claim freedom from male supremacy, racial, socio-economic and all forms of global injustices.

**Keywords:** African indigenous religion, colonialism, justice, male supremacy, Mbuya Nehanda, resistance theology, resurrection theology, Spirit medium, oppression, Zimbabwe

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<sup>1</sup> The Shona term “Mbuya” literally refers to “grandmother.” It is also used to express respect either for elderly women or for women who hold a position of authority. Here, it is used to express the high respect and honour that the Zimbabweans ascribe to Mbuya Nehanda for her historic role.

## Introduction

Colonialism wreaked havoc not only in Zimbabwe but in all the colonized territories world over. The colonial-induced injustices endured by the indigenous people of Zimbabwe led Mbuya Nehanda to defy the patriarchal outlook in the Shona traditional religion by rising to the occasion and leading the resistance movement against the colonial empire. Through her tenacious and resolute leadership, she managed to resurrect the spirit of resistance against colonial oppression in Zimbabwe. Mbuya Nehanda challenged the status quo by going against the societal expectations whereby leadership was (and continues to be) male centred. She also defied the odds by daring to challenge the British colonial regime, which was perceived as invincible. Mbuya Nehanda's revolutionary spirit and boldness to challenge white supremacy in Zimbabwe ignited the zeal of the general populace to continue fighting for independence, even several years after she had been executed. Our paper, therefore, invites all those who are trapped in the throes of marginalization, injustice and dehumanization to be spurred by the theologies of resurrection and tenacious resistance. Whilst drawing from the wells of Mbuya Nehanda's indigenous wisdom and tenacity to resist, those facing any form of injustice should defy and break all the chains that continue to bind them in the doldrums of the empire. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part will focus on the biography of Mbuya Nehanda and how she resisted white supremacy, which eventually led to her execution at the hands of the colonial oppressors who were desperately trying to silence her. Reflecting on the experiences of contemporary African women, using the Shona women as a case study, the second part of the paper proffers that women should be motivated, empowered and propelled by Mbuya Nehanda's spirit to resist any form of oppression they are going through. This is informed by the understanding that resurrection theology is about becoming active agents of positive change and transformation to restore justice, equality and the humanity of all people, regardless of their colour or creed. Similarly, we foreground the fact that the theology of resistance is hinged on the insistence that the world cannot continue to accommodate evil and injustice. Hence, evils such as the racial and gender oppression that the world was and is still facing have to be challenged. Whilst some people use religion to mask their pain and others manipulate religion as a tool to cow others to submit to being silenced, oppressed and dehumanized by the empire, our paper foregrounds the need for religion to nurture a

vibrant resistance theology which has the power to resurrect all those entombed by the life-denying and death-dealing forces of the empire (See Zvingowanisei and Chirongoma 2021; Chirongoma and Mupangwa 2021). We also emphasize the fact that the resurrection motif should continue to energize and empower the oppressed, marginalized and silenced members of the human family to challenge and resist the status quo.

## **Who is Mbuya Nehanda?**

Mbuya Nehanda was a spirit medium whose birth and actual name was Charwe Hwata. Charwe was born around 1862 and raised in Mazowe in the area now known as Chishawasha in central Mashonaland of Zimbabwe (Bertho 2018). The name Mbuya Nehanda is an honorary name as a result of her having been elevated to the status of a medium of a royal spirit of the first Nehanda, who was called Nyamhita Nyakasikana of Handa, the daughter of Mutota. Therefore, the name Mbuya Nehanda was polysemous as it referred to anyone who was possessed by this spirit (Bertho 2018). Bertho (2018) further avers that Charwe was initiated to become a spirit medium of Nehanda at a young age. Only when she had grown up, she began to function as a respected spirit medium of Nyamhita.

Not much about her parents and family is known except that they were hardworking farmers who were highly religious. The level of religiousness for Nehanda's family is reflected in her life, especially as an adult. She grew up in a very happy and loving family; hence, she had a secure and happy life (Mutunhu 1976). Due to her solid family background, she matured into a woman with remarkable leadership abilities and organizational skills (Mutunhu 1976). As she was growing up, Charwe was often described as kind-hearted, highly ethical and morally principled. It is said that people in her community regarded her as a woman of strong principles, endowed with wisdom and a clear and firm vision. She showed leadership skills, and she was highly organized in whatever she did (Mutunhu 1976). As a spirit medium, Nehanda became the intermediary of communication between the living Shona societies and the ancestral spirits. Nehanda is a depiction of resistance against the battles fought in the 19th and 20th centuries against colonialism. Nehanda Charwe is recognized as one of the greatest military leaders and freedom fighters of the 1880s and 1890s due to her resistance to colonialism in Southern Rhodesia (Bertho 2018).

Tapping into her spiritually and socially defined authority, Mbuya Nehanda functioned as a movement intellectual to the Chimurenga. She meticulously crafted strategies and motivation for a social protest that eventually led to the first Chimurenga (Kaoma 2016). Even though she was not a politician, she recruited the masses into a huge revolt against colonialism in what is popularly known and celebrated as the first Chimurenga (the war of liberation) of 1896-97. It is said that Mbuya Nehanda used cultural regulations and the Mwari cult to organize and lead a resistance movement against the British colonizers (Mafuranhunzi 1995). In this resistance, she was in control such that she was not just a visionary but also a pivotal pillar in providing the political structure for the social revolt (Kaoma 2016).

Nehanda was a courageous woman who eventually received a death sentence for her advocacy against racism. Before she died by execution, she boldly declared to the white settlers *mapfupa angu achamuka* (my bones will rise again). In uttering these words, she was prophetically declaring that even if they were to destroy her physical body, however, the seeds of resistance against colonial repression which she had planted were going to continue spreading well after her mortal body had been exterminated from this Mother Earth. In essence, Mbuya Nehanda was making a prophetic statement affirming that the spilling of her blood by execution was laying a symbolic and firm foundation for a theology of resistance and a fervour for the resurrection spirit, which was definitely going to continue fanning the anti-colonial fire even well after her death.

### **What informed Mbuya Nehanda's spirit of resistance?**

Mbuya Nehanda was a leader of a countermovement to social injustices created by colonialism. As a leader of a revolting group, she was highly influenced by the Shona culture to successfully execute her military leadership duties. Furthermore, she also depended on the Mwari cult to organize the resistance movement. Mwari (God) in African indigenous religion only communicated with people through spirit mediums such as Mbuya Nehanda. In this regard, African indigenous religions played a proactive role in their engagement with colonialism. In the case of the first Chimurenga war, Mbuya Nehanda drew from the solid foundation of her African indigenous religion's sanctioned authority to successfully execute the resistance movement against white imperialism (Mutunhu 1976; Kaoma 2016).

In addition, Mbuya Nehanda was motivated to encourage the masses to revolt against the colonizers because the conditions that Cecil John Rhodes and the British South Africa Company had established in Southern Rhodesia were no longer tenable. As immigrants from Britain began to increase in Rhodesia in the 1880s, the relations between settlers and the indigenous owners of the land began to deteriorate. For instance, in 1888, Cecil John Rhodes obtained mining rights in Zimbabwe through trickery and criminal means. He tricked Lobengula, the king of the Ndebele, into signing a treaty that allowed him to mine minerals in the then Southern Rhodesia. It is believed that Lobengula, due to a failure to understand the British language in the treaty, was tricked into granting Cecil John Rhodes and his colleagues mining rights without understanding the actual meaning of the treaty he was signing. Cecil John Rhodes then used the Rudd concession in 1889 to acquire a Royal Charter for his Company to colonize Zimbabwe and subjugate its peoples (Mutunhu 1976). On 12 September 1890, the Union Jack was hoisted into place, formally annexing Zimbabwe as a British Colony. The settlers began to rob the Zimbabweans of their land and cattle. The indigenous Zimbabweans were driven to the barren, dry, and infertile land, most of which was unsuitable for human habitation, whilst the settlers occupied the fertile lands. In addition, they also sexually abused the Shona women, who were highly revered in Shona culture. This did not go down well with the Shona leaders. The circumstances continued to deteriorate from 1890 to 1896. As time went on, the indigenous religious leaders such as Mbuya Nehanda began to collaborate with political leaders in fighting against oppression from the British colonial empire which had taken over the social, political and economic leadership of their country.

Mbuya Nehanda was extremely appalled by the social injustices that the indigenous Zimbabweans were going through. She was convinced that the white people's deeds were evil, inhuman, and destructive. Vambe (1972:120) highlights that Mbuya Nehanda "viewed the White men, as filled with hate and fear, killing her people as if they were game or vermin and asked the spirits of the ancestors again and again why they had brought this evil." She could not endure witnessing her people being removed from their ancestral homes without their consent, subjected to racial and political oppression, economic exploitation, dehumanizing forced labour, and unbearable physical torture by the settlers. Mbuya Nehanda was convinced that Mwari disapproved of the British presence and demanded that they be removed. All these forms of oppression led

her to dedicate much of her time in training men and women who volunteered to fight under her leadership. By the time the first Chimurenga began, Mbuya Nehanda's soldiers were ready to fight the forces of colonialism and economic exploitation. To strengthen her strategies, Mbuya Nehanda instituted military headquarters in the Husaka Mountain's network of caves (Bertho 2018). Her motivation in doing all this was to liberate the people of Zimbabwe from colonial repression.

### **Mbuya Nehanda's wisdom as pillars for the theologies of resistance and resurrection**

Mbuya Nehanda never got an opportunity to write about her theology or philosophy of life. However, we can deduce her theology and philosophy of life from how she conducted her life, particularly how she responded to the colonial empire. For instance, her theology of resistance did not compartmentalize the indigenous Zimbabwean men and women's experiences of colonial repression. Neither did she envisage indigenous men and women as enemies who were antagonistic towards each other. Additionally, she did not envision the experiences of colonial repression as a system solely rooted in patriarchal structures. Rather, she viewed men and women as partners, complementing each other in their struggle against colonial systems that undermined both women and men of Zimbabwe. Her army comprised both men and women, which is an indication that she believed in partnership, unity and solidarity. Without men in the equation, Mbuya Nehanda perceived the army as a one-winged bird with limited capacity to function properly. She embraced the reality that there was a need for the inclusion of both men and women in the army so that it could effectively operate, just like a two-winged bird can soar above the heights. This resonates with African Women Theologians' two-winged theology (See Oduyoye 1990; Chirongoma and Mupangwa 2021; Mupangwa and Chirongoma 2021a; Mupangwa and Chirongoma 2021b). Similarly, Mbuya Nehanda's collaboration with Sekuru<sup>2</sup> Kaguvi shows that she believed that unified collaboration between men and women was

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<sup>2</sup> This is a Shona term meaning 'grandfather,' it is either used to refer to an elderly man as a code of respect or it can also be used as an honorific term, in reference to a person holding a position of authority such as a chief, king or spirit medium. In this sense, Sekuru Kaguvi was one of the renowned

crucial if Zimbabwe was to be liberated. Hence, Mbuya Nehanda's stance was that women and men were not opponents but counterparts in the struggle against white supremacy, which undermined women and elevated men. This is where her philosophy of life, which is the seedbed for resistance and resurrection theology, runs counter to the central tenets of Western feminism. Western feminism views men as enemies and prioritizes sexism more than racism and class (Hudson-Weems 1993). Aidoo (1999), for example, is quoted as having claimed that "Western feminists appear as 'destroyers of homes.' Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African homes" (See also Oyewumi 2002, 2016). Thus, in partnership with men, Mbuya Nehanda dismantled the patriarchy which upheld the headship of men and was used as a ploy by the British colonial empire to pursue their goal of tearing asunder the solid African family and societal networks. Her emphasis was on eradicating the racism that the Zimbabwean people were being subjected to.

There is an aspect of family centrality in Mbuya Nehanda's theology of resistance. As a loving and devoted mother, Mbuya Nehanda resisted the white settlers for the sake of her family. Just like many other families and societal anchored African women, she was never concerned solely about her personal interests and pursuits. Rather, Mbuya Nehanda was resolute in placing the family at the center for ultimate human survival. Since a mother is a nurturer of children, Mbuya Nehanda used that strength of being a nurturer to lead the liberation movement for Zimbabwe. She nurtured the freedom fighters until they were ready to fight the enemy.

In addition, Mbuya Nehanda's theology of resurrection shows flexible role playing. She demonstrated comfort in the domestic sphere with the family, and the workplace as the leader of an army, not sacrificing either role in her quest for fulfilment. While she appreciated traditional male and female roles, she was not trapped in the patriarchal assigned gender roles, as she did what was to be done at any given time. When she had to train soldiers, she took up the role without being constrained by her sexuality as a woman, particularly in light of the fact that during that time, the colonial empire had relegated women to the domestic realm. She took up the responsibility of a politician even though she was a woman because she knew that she had the capacity to free the country from European oppression.

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spirit mediums who joined arms with Mbuya Nehanda to lead the war against the colonial empire.

Spirituality is another aspect that characterized Mbuya Nehanda's theology of resistance. Spirituality means having a sacred belief in a higher being or power (Lepherd 2015). Mbuya Nehanda was highly religious and spiritual. The source of her power and ability was Mwari (God). She communicated with Mwari (God) through the ancestors (Mutunhu 1976). It is this sacred power that sustained her throughout her lifetime. This theology of resistance empowers women to understand their gendered status in society, while giving them a voice to negotiate their survival and equality in a world that is dominated by patriarchal trends and other forms of oppression.

By continuing to inspire the masses to rise and fight against oppression even beyond the grave, Mbuya Nehanda's resistance theology has birthed a theology of resurrection as her resurrected spirit continues to power the engine of freedom and liberation of the oppressed. Her spirit has become the force that energizes those who have endured marginalization and indignity for too long, to rise up from the ashes and reclaim their humanity and dignity. It is akin to being awakened from the graves where they were buried under the oppressive hands of the empire. That zeal to arise and resist oppression can be manifested in various ways. It is these numerous facets of resistance that we turn to discuss below.

## **Experiences of black women as they fought western hegemony**

The spirit of resistance against western domination amongst women was not only found in Nehanda of Zimbabwe. Similar defiance and resilience were also exuded by other African women such as queen Nzinga of Angola, Kimpa Vita of the Kingdom of Kongo and Nontetha Nkwenkwe of South Africa. Nontetha Nkwenkwe survived a deadly influenza epidemic in 1918 which ripped the whole of South Africa. Her survival made her believe that she was spared from this virus for a purpose. The colonizers thought she was mentally disturbed because she also functioned as a prophet besides resisting settler domination. Consequently, they arrested her and held her in isolation which eventually led to her death (South African History Online, n.d.).

Kimpa Vita was also killed when she mobilised the Kingdom of Kongo to fight against the Portuguese who had destroyed the kingdom, which they had found developed and organized politically, spiritually, socially and morally. Kimpa fought hard with the determination that her people

should gain liberation in all those facets of life. She utilized both Catholicism and the Kongo people's indigenous religion as an avenue of overthrowing the colonizers and in the process, she came up with a new religion. Through her new religion, her intention was to awaken the citizens of the Kongo to the challenges they faced and to the need to unite. It was through Kimpa's newly found religious movement that the Bakongo were made to realize that it was their responsibility to reclaim their independence and not that of the foreign God, whom the colonizers had introduced to them. The movement grew exponentially and the Portuguese colonial authorities began to feel really threatened by this movement. In order to stop the movement, the Portuguese felt that it was necessary for her to die. She was therefore sentenced to death by fire (Bayeck 2021).

Queen Nzinga of Angola is well-known for resisting European colonization as well. Nzinga Mbande took a leading role for four decades in the war against the Portuguese in Angola. During Queen Nzinga's reign, Angola was under siege from the Portuguese and they had adopted the 'divide and rule' trajectory to fuel conflict between the ethnic groups. The Ndongo Kingdom had become a source of slaves for the Portuguese and their wish was to expand the colony. In 1622, Nzinga negotiated peace terms with the Portuguese governor in Luanda. She used her charisma to inspire her people to resist the Europeans (Black History Heroes Blog, n.d.).

The story of these three women shows that European invaders and/or colonizers met resistance on the African continent. Their story also underscores the leading role of women in resisting exploitation and colonization in Africa. This is evidence that women are not always defenceless individuals. They have strategies which can be implemented to fight not only for their rights, but for the rights of their communities as well.

Nehanda received a death sentence and Kimpa Vita was condemned to death for advocating against racism. The killing of these African women simply because they were fighting oppression is evidence that the colonizers did not value the lives of the black people. The life of a person is sacred and no one has the right to take it away irregardless of their color, race, class or gender. The colonizers had no right to take away their lives. However, the body can become a weapon of war. Despite the fact that they were killed, the resistance movements against colonial domination which they had birthed did not stop with the death of these powerful women, instead the revolutions intensified and eventually these African countries gained independence.

Their strength which was unusual and as warriors, spiritual leaders and anti-colonialist, is an excellent example of African women's commitment to the values of self-reliance and survival. From the period they started putting themselves in the forefront, other women in their nations joined in the struggle of resisting the colonizers. The isolation, the arrests and physical torture which they endured indicates the harrowing experiences that black women went through as they disturbed Western hegemony through resilience. The colonialists thought that subjecting these women to cruelty and violence was going to scare and dissuade them from leading the anti-colonial movements. However, these African women are icons of women's tenacity and resoluteness. Even in the face of death, their fortitude and resilience is testament to the fact that when women are determined to achieve a goal, they normally do not abort their mission until their vision has been accomplished. She makes sure that the vision is birthed. Their visionary and sterling leadership indicates that when a woman leads a movement, the people following her are never led into a donga (pit). Masenya (2016) noted that this refutes some stereotypical views claiming that when a woman leads, the people will fall into a (pit).

## Forms of resistance

### *Writing as a form of resistance*

One can use their writing skills to express discontent about the status quo. For instance, some women can resort to writing as an outlet to express their displeasure about the ingrained gender disparities in the domestic sphere, work places and also in the way the country is being run politically. There are several examples of women, such as African feminist writers, who use their lived experiences to challenge and protest against gender injustice and gender oppression (See Phiri 2009 and Chisale 2017). Most of these African feminists belong to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter, the Circle). The main objective of the Circle is to encourage women theologians to use writing to actively reflect on their experiences of patriarchal oppression in religion and society (Phiri 2009). There is power in the written word, hence, the Circle encourages women and offers them mentorship to author articles and books, reflecting on their own experiences. Through writing, more women will be encouraged and empowered to critique and to resist all forms of oppression.

However, Chisale (2017) laments the fact that this strategy may not be very effective because some women do not make an effort to read. Additionally, many more women are overburdened with the responsibility of undertaking household chores such that they do not find enough time to read and write. As a result, reading and writing often ends up becoming the preserve for women who are in academia. For this method to be more effective, women should not be limited to writing academic journal articles, books and book chapters; instead, they can also post their writings on other non-academic platforms. For instance, social media platforms may prove to be effective since most young people visit such platforms on almost a daily basis. Cognizant of this, the Circle has continually encouraged women to vocalize their views and opinions through writing by providing an opportunity for both academic and non-academic women to contribute to some manuscripts which publish short stories, poems, songs, prayers or short sermons. Such initiatives provide an avenue for women activists from various walks of life to put their thoughts into writing. Thus, writing as resistance should be strategically utilized if it is to achieve its purpose of transforming our society into an egalitarian society (Chisale 2017).

### *Speaking out as Resistance*

Besides writing, women can also exercise their agency by speaking out or refusing to comply as a tool of resistance in both private and public spaces. Silence in some cases perpetuates oppression. In her study, Chisale (2017) found out that some women, particularly those who are the sole breadwinners, tend to resist control by voicing their concerns. However, another impediment is that due to the unequal gendered access to resources and opportunities, especially in the current Zimbabwean socio-economic situation, some women are shushed into silence because they will be trying to be cautious to avoid the proverbial biting of the hand that feeds them. Consequently, those who are not economically empowered do not have much liberty to express their disgruntlement. Another obstruction as noted by Chisale (2016) is the fact that some women are afraid of being labelled disrespectful, rude and unmarriageable material, hence, they resort to silence. It is therefore important to acknowledge that for some African women, with particular reference to the Shona in Zimbabwe, silence is not a matter of choice, rather, it is a matter of conforming to tradition and it is part of the politics of gender and identity. We contend that speaking out as resistance is a powerful resource which

should be used by every woman regardless their social class. As such, young women and girls should be socialized to embrace this tool as a valuable resource for their empowerment. Standing firmly on Mbuya Nehanda's shoulders, the women and girls of Zimbabwe, Africa and the world over should be inspired as they aspire to break the fetters of gender oppression and all other injustices which deny men and women their full humanity and dignity.

### ***Silence as resistance***

Though silence, in some cases, can perpetuate domination, in some instances, it can also prove to be an effective way of resisting oppression. Tamale (2004) explains that African women are also socialized to resist domination in silence. Women's silence is often underestimated as a hidden transcript of resistance against patriarchy (Chisale 2017). Silence can be utilized as an effective tool of resistance against any form of domination. For example, some women use silence to protest against patriarchy in their marriage, family and societal set-up. This resonates with the research findings in a study conducted by Tamale (2004), she also concluded that women perceive silence as a critical tool in fighting against the abuse of power, especially in a patriarchal context. As the old adage goes, "silence speaks louder than words." Hence, there are times when the silence of the oppressed disarms the oppressor as the oppressor will be feeling uncomfortable, unease and afraid of the implication of their victim's silence.

### ***Physical engagement as resistance***

Whilst we are not encouraging people to engage in unwarranted physical violence, it, however, must be acknowledged that if it is the only option that can guarantee freedom, then the oppressed will have no choice but to resort to it to restore their freedom. History has taught us as a human race that situations may warrant the oppressed to physically fight the battle against their oppressors to win back their freedom and unfasten the chains imposed upon them. The example of the children of Israel as they journeyed towards the Promised Land is illustrative here. They engaged in a number of wars along their long walk to freedom as the tribes they encountered along the way wanted to dominate and to rule over them. However, after countless years of servitude under the Egyptian empire,

they were resolute about maintaining their freedom, and they had to engage in warfare to liberate themselves. In the same light, even after having endured years of oppression and injustice, African women and all other people heaving under the yoke of oppression world over should never be intimidated by their oppressors. Instead of wallowing in apathy and hopelessness, they should boldly adopt the strategy whenever the situation requires them to physically fight against the oppressor. Mbuya Nehanda encouraged Zimbabweans to physically fight the enemy, which eventually led to the liberation of the country, well after her demise. Even in the contemporary times, the memory of her determination, courage and fortitude to lead the war against the oppressor remains indelibly etched in the history of Zimbabwe. Her strong will and her courageous spirit of resistance continues to be invoked not only by the people of Zimbabwe, but by other African nationalities whenever the situation necessitates violent resistance against injustice and oppression.

### *Divorce as a form of resistance*

Breaking the chains of abuse, violence and dehumanization through divorce is another powerful form of resistance. This is against the backdrop that many Christian churches in Zimbabwe and other parts of the global community teach that divorce is a sin. This teaching is mostly based on a twisted interpretation of the text which says, "God hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16). Some Christian husbands deliberately abuse their wives physically and emotionally because they are under the impression that the women are bound by the fear to sue for divorce since it is considered as a sin. Newspapers have also continually reported stories of countless women who have died as a result of enduring brutal abuse in their marriages. Domestic violence has become one of the leading causes of death as some Christian women including public figures and well accomplished women remain trapped in abusive marriages. It is heart breaking how numerous women have continued to persevere in toxic marriages, leading them to an early grave. Escaping from the vicious cycle of abuse and indignities through divorcing the abusive husband can therefore be recommended as one of the practical and effective ways of resisting oppression. However, it is also important to acknowledge that there are other amicable ways of resolving conflict in a marriage which should be pursued before resorting to divorce.

## Resistance and Resurrection Theologies as a Panacea of Violence and Oppression

In this section, the discussion will focus on how most Christian churches and the Shona culture in Zimbabwe view and respond to oppression, with a specific focus on how this impacted the way the oppressed respond to their uncomfortable circumstances at a continental and global level. It is an open secret that most churches view resistance as something evil. They encourage prayer more than taking action against any form of domination. The Christian teachings and the Shona cultural instructions on marriage encourage women to persevere in the hardships they face. Women are advised never to show signs of resistance because this may make the husband to be more aggressive than before. One of the oft quoted and abused scripture is Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” As noted by Chirongoma (2006), Manyonganise (2015) as well as Sande and Chirongoma (2021), in the Shona culture, some of the often regurgitated wisdom sayings used to sustain the silencing of women trapped in abusive marriages are *murume ndiye musoro wemba* (the husband is the head of the homestead), hence, his actions/instructions must never be questioned; *chakafukidza dzimba matenga* (the domestic affairs should remain within the confines of the homestead); *nhumbu mukadzi mukuru, hairevi chayadya* (just as the stomach never discloses whatever it has swallowed, in the same manner, a mature/responsible woman should never disclose whatever struggles she’s going through within her domestic sphere); *usafukura hapwa pane vanhu* (a virtuous woman does not reveal the secrets of her family, in the same manner that a decent person does not expose her armpits in public). It is appallingly unfortunate that so many women have been made to uncritically follow such teachings but such strategies have never produced positive results. For example, some women have endured abusive marriages for more than 20 years, and yet their husbands have never changed for the better. Our standpoint in this chapter is to reassert the fact that resisting oppression is not a sin and women should never feel guilty nor be condemned when they resist oppression in marriage.

Politically, women are also experiencing oppression and discrimination. The Zimbabwean government just like most African governments is male dominated. Some of the political decisions being made by this male bloated leadership are negatively impacting the economy of Zimbabwe, consequently exposing many women to extreme poverty and inequality.

Instead of waiting for positive change and transformation to be granted to the people of Zimbabwe on a silver platter, the people who are failing to breathe under the oppressive systems which are suffocating them need to take an initiative to redress the injustices being perpetrated by the present regime (See Zvingowanisei and Chirongoma 2021). In our view, it is not enough for the church to continuously encourage its members to simply pray so that God can change the situation in Zimbabwe. While prayer is an effective weapon for turning situations around, there are circumstances when one is compelled to go beyond prayer and take a stance to openly denounce and resist oppression. Another historical event during the second liberation struggle in Zimbabwe is also illustrative here. In a bid to register their outrage against the unlawful arrest of Chief Reikai Tangwena, the women from Chief Reikai Tangwena's jurisdiction demonstrated by walking bare breasted and this demonstration immensely contributed towards his eventual release (Herald, 8 May 2013). Among these women, most probably there were Christians too who decided to take their Christianity beyond praying to a better and higher level of taking action.

Resistance will always face resistance and, most of the time, with very negative consequences. Mbuya Nehanda paid the price by sacrificing her own life. Women who stand up to oppose patriarchy should be prepared to be labelled and stigmatized by their families and society as a whole (Siwila 2012; Oduyoye 1994; Moyo 2005). Women should never allow fear to be a barrier to fighting for their freedom. Oppression in all forms should be resisted.

However, women should have wisdom as they apply the various methods of resistance. Mbuya Nehanda was wise enough to discern that their situation needed them to take up arms and not just talk about it or resist in silence. Women should know when to hold placards and when not to, when to be silent and when not to be, because circumstances may not require the same strategies. If a wrong strategy is employed, the resistance may end up being a catalyst for further oppression. With wisdom, the strategy employed will definitely become a tool for resistance and an avenue for liberation.

Being a Christian should never be a hindrance to resisting oppression. In fact, Christianity is about bringing liberty into the lives of people. The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, recorded in Exodus 1 vv15-20, resisted the tyrannical mandate, refusing to comply, and they helped to deliver the Hebrew children, male and female. In doing all this, they were

displaying their fear of God and in the process, they were also putting their own lives at stake because defying Pharaoh's instruction was a crime punishable by death.

It is also our contention that the resurrection event is not confined to something that happened in the past, rather, resurrection is action taken now. We experience the resurrection when Christians refuse to surrender to violence, to the abuse of men and women because of their race, gender, social class, religious affiliation or any other distinctive marks. The resurrection becomes real when those suffering feel the divine presence encircling them and taking them through the process of emancipation from all forms of discrimination. Christ is risen when we hold fast to our own humanity and the humanity of others in the face of the violence that denies them the opportunity to enjoy their gift of having been created in *imago Dei*.

## CONCLUSION

Mbuya Nehanda boldly and selflessly embraced the responsibility of making a change in her society by resisting white oppression. She sacrificed her life because her heart's desire was to see her people living in peace and tranquillity, where they would be enjoying the freedom to control their own political destiny and way of life. May the resistance and resurrection theologies which were endowed in Mbuya Nehanda continue to arise, shine and lead the men and women of Zimbabwe, all African nationals and the whole human race to join heads and arms to resist, fight and eradicate all forms of discrimination and oppression. This would usher in a new Mother Earth, endowed with the spirit of shalom.

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## 2 | “Other Ways of Reading”: Musa W. Dube and Postcolonial Feminist Reading of the Bible

*Mutale Mulenga Kaunda*

*“In this extremely gendered colonial language, the African continent was being penetrated by the West, its male subjugator, and inseminated with Western seed to give birth to the Westernized African.”*  
Musa W Dube (2013:2)<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This chapter reflects on some of the distinct key metaphors and concepts that Musa Dube espouses in her African postcolonial feminist thinking and how these contribute to African women’s liberation theologies. Intentionally focusing on two key concepts/metaphors in Dube’s postcolonial feminist theologies, this chapter affirms Dube’s African women’s postcolonial theologizing using a decolonial lens. The chapter draws on how Dube advances further, and employs these concepts/metaphors as tools of analyzing biblical texts. Dube recognizes the potential of the bible having death dealing forces in Africa if not interpreted critically, especially for women and she uses apt concepts/metaphors as alternative ways of reading the bible for fullness of life.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Feminist, Gender, Culture, Bible, Musa Dube, Talitha Cum

### Introduction

Dube has greatly, intentionally and efficiently contributed to African feminist postcolonial theories. She nuances the effects of religion, culture

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<sup>1</sup> Dube, Musa. “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives”, in *Society of Biblical Literature Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Vol. 13, ed. by Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, 1-26. (Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta, 2012).

and biblical hermeneutics especially in the ways that the bible is read and how particular ways of reading the bible might contribute to impacting women negatively or positively. She is a Professor of New Testament at the Candler School of Theology and is renowned for her work in feminist postcolonial<sup>2</sup> biblical scholarship. Dube is an African woman who has focused on other ways of reading the bible for social transformation and gender justice. This chapter is a celebration of Dube's postcolonial Bible reading which is illustrated in some of her key concepts such as 'Talitha Cum' and 'Language', and how she has embodied mentorship of young scholars, which are the two concepts focused on in this chapter. Ezra Chitando and Rosinah Gabaitse have written an article on Dube, celebrating her activism and biblical reflections on HIV and AIDS in Africa<sup>3</sup>. Lovemore Togorasei<sup>4</sup> has also written an article on Dube titled "Musa W. Dube and the study of the Bible in Africa". It is worth mentioning that Dube has worked academically and in activism with various scholars, male and female in her works.

As the current continental coordinator of the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, Dube has focused part of her leadership on young African women theologians (as rising stars) on writing mentorship. Dube was a University of Botswana faculty member in Theology and Religious Studies from 1988. When the Circle was being inaugurated in Ghana in 1989 where 69 women from various African countries gathered, Dube was not among them, she only came to hear about this gathering after it had passed. In a conversation with Dube while we were planning for the first volume of Circle pioneering women, Dube lamented that she heard about the Circle inauguration a week after the meeting was over in Ghana. In her own words, Dube stated, "Looking at this list, it was only my country in Southern Africa that was skipped. And I was already in the department as a staff development fellow. The funny thing is, one week after the meeting, I was then told about it. Now I wonder if the invitation

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<sup>2</sup> Dube, Musa. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*. (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 1-221.

<sup>3</sup> Ezra Chitando and Rosinah Gabaitse, 2008. "Other Ways of Being a Diviner-Healer: Musa W. Dube and the African Church's Response to HIV and AIDS", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXIV, 29-54.

<sup>4</sup> Musa Dube "Musa W Dube and the study of the Bible in Africa", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, XXXIV, 55-74.

letter was just kept silently from me."<sup>5</sup> Dube later joined the Circle and has been one of the many Circle matriarchs who have given leadership to the growth of the Circle in collaboration with Circle women. As preparations are underway for the 2024 Circle Conference in Ghana, there are a number of Circle volumes that are being written under the mentorship of Dube to be published before the Sankofa Conference.

African women theologians have argued that women's experiences are a starting point of women's theological reflection (Phiri and Nadar 2006:8). Theological reflection and engagements are embedded within human experiences, particularly women's experiences because theology is not done in a vacuum, it has a focus on the real-life experiences of human beings and their communities. Dube has been instrumental in the construction of postcolonial research, frameworks and methodologies, she embodies this form of research. Her embodiment of research is explained below in the section titled Embodied Scholarship. Her postcolonial scholarship is focused on black feminism, and she is bold enough to explicitly state difficult issues, for instance, rereading Matthew 5 Dube<sup>6</sup> was bold enough to state:

I can hear Jesus saying to us: I was sick with AIDS and you did not visit me. You did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine to manage my opportunistic infections. I was stigmatized, isolated and rejected because of HIV/AIDS and you did not welcome me. I was hungry, thirsty and naked, completely dispossessed by HIV/AIDS and globalization in my house and family and you did not give me food, water or any clothing. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not come to my rescue. I was a dispossessed widow and an orphan, and you did not meet my needs.

Her research is at the intersection of postcolonial theories, HIV and AIDS, culture, gender, sacred texts, and religion. Born and bred in Botswana to Zimbabwean parents, (both countries are in the Southern Africa), she has been at the cutting edge of research on postcolonial biblical scholarship and has been teaching for 36 years (since 1988). As a New Testament scholar, she grapples with the question, how to read the bible

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<sup>5</sup> Musa Dube, 2021. Personal Communication, 1 December.

<sup>6</sup> Musa Dube, "Theological Challenges: Proclaiming the Fullness of Life in the HIV/AIDS & Global Economic Era", *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 363 (2002), 535-549; 537-538.

as a black woman who was colonized through the bible. Dube is celebrated as she offers the postcolonial<sup>7</sup> bible reading for social justice. The first section will engage Dube's Postcolonial Feminist Theologizing with a focus on HIV and AIDS, the next section will focus on two of Dube's key concepts in her postcolonial African feminist theory and their demonstration of her African postcolonial feminist theory which calls for other ways of reading the bible. The third section will interrogate her embodiment of these key metaphors in the way she mentors younger scholars within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians network.

### **Musa W Dube's Postcolonial Feminist Theologizing**

Since publishing her first peer reviewed journal article in 1989, Dube has been a prolific and an astute biblical scholar with over 59 journal articles to her name. This number does not contain the book chapters, books and journals edited and is not exhaustive as Dube continues to inspire with her scholarship and publications. At the heart of Dube's theologizing is the call for transformation, emancipation and liberation of African women's lives, this is also the Circle's theology. African postcolonial feminist hermeneutics of transformation offers critical assessment in the models of social engagement between Biblical scholars and women in faith communities. For Dube, focusing on postcolonial feminist reading of the bible is a personal motivation drawing on how her parents were displaced in Zimbabwe by the white settlers who grabbed land from Zimbabweans at the time<sup>8</sup>. They were forced to move to Botswana where Dube was later born. The African dictum suffices here, "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had

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<sup>7</sup> Johanna Stiebert and Musa Dube, *The Bible Centers & Margins: Dialogues Between Postcolonial African and UK Biblical Scholars*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018).

Dube, M.W. & R.W. Wafula (Eds.), *Postcoloniality, Translation and the Bible in Africa*. (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

Dube, M.W., Andrew Mbuvi & Dora Mbuwayesango (Eds.), *Postcolonial Perspectives on African Biblical Interpretations*. (Atlanta: SBL, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Chitando and Rosinah Gabaitse, 2008. "Other Ways of Being a Diviner-Healer: Musa W. Dube and the African Church's Response to HIV and AIDS", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXIV, 29-54; 30-31.

the Bible, and they had the land.”<sup>9</sup> Land grabbing anywhere certainly would affect women more disproportionately. Just as any injustice to any nation impacts on women much more negatively and severely. While gender justice issues continue to be raised globally, women are still at the receiving end of many forms of injustices. Patriarchal constructed norms continue to favour men more than women and therefore, women are disproportionately impacted in various forms of injustices.

There have been various issues that have held African women’s lives down and excluded them from diverse decision-making spaces, even when decisions are about them as women. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, HIV and AIDS, according to the UN 2000 report, was spreading rapidly and Africa had the highest infections, young African women<sup>10</sup> were highest impacted. Dube has continued to engage in the research around HIV and AIDS because HIV and AIDS has continued to impact African women and girls disproportionately.

According to the 2000 UNAIDS report<sup>11</sup>, there was fear, stigma and denial during this period for HIV and AIDS, and this led into a vicious cycle of these three making it difficult for those infected to seek medical care. Many were uninformed, making them vulnerable to contracting AIDS. Some women were infected with HIV and AIDS within their marriages. Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar<sup>12</sup> have argued that marriage is a dangerous institution for African women because of certain cultural devotions that deny women life. Due to little or no sexual reproductive health awareness, information and services, young girls and women continue to be in vulnerable situations for various reasons such as gender-based violence within homes, schools, communities, religious spaces etc. The clergy in churches were almost quiet or maybe needed more skills to engage and reflect on the HIV and AIDS situation in Africa. Theologians in seminaries, bible schools and universities began to speak out about these issues

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<sup>9</sup> This dictum is usually alluded to archbishop Desmond Tutu and Jomo Kenyatta.

<sup>10</sup> Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2000. [https://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2000/2000\\_gr\\_en.pdf](https://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2000/2000_gr_en.pdf) [Accessed on January 23rd, 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Report on the Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2000. [https://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2000/2000\\_gr\\_en.pdf](https://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2000/2000_gr_en.pdf) [Accessed on January 23rd, 2023].

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Phiri & Sarojini Nadar, 2009. “Going through the Fire with Eyes Wide Open’: African Women’s Perspective on Indigenous Knowledge, Patriarchy and Sexuality”, *Journal for the Study of Religion* 22/2, 2-22; 6.

through activism, research and publications thereby creating tools, approaches and methods of engaging the HIV and AIDS epidemic more humanely in religious spaces. Mainstreaming HIV and AIDS in the curriculum was and still is of great importance for holistic education. Dube is one of the biblical scholars who took the HIV and AIDS issue seriously and rose to the challenge of creating awareness of the overwhelming impact the epidemic had on women. This led to numerous research works that Dube has published<sup>13</sup>.

The way the bible is read is key to the liberation of African women. Dube draws on her biblical scholarship and women's experiences of the bible, culture, religious spaces and the history of African women being left behind. Dube does theology or theologizes "not only with the entire community in mind, but also with the entire community present in voice."<sup>14</sup> As a biblical scholar, Dube argues that "combining Bible and culture is a recognition that authoritative texts for African women are more than just the written religious texts. Rather African cultures remain vibrant and authoritative texts in the lives of women, and they need to be studied, analyzed, and reinterpreted for a creation of a just world and the empowerment of women."<sup>15</sup> Further, Dube argues that "The Bible has been read within precolonial, colonial, struggle-for-independence, post-independence, neo-colonial and globalization contexts."<sup>16</sup> The bible has to be read through postcolonial gendered lens to be relevant and to be inclusive in the approach to social justice. For Dube, postcolonial theologizing does not do justice if it fails to emphasise on the issues that disproportionately

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<sup>13</sup> Musa Dube, *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological programmes*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003); Musa Dube, *Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS & Globalization Era*. <http://koed.hu/talitha/musa.pdf> [Accessed on 1 January 2023]; Musa Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible: Selected Essays*. (Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 2008) to mention just a few.

<sup>14</sup> Oluwatomisin Oredein. "Word and Witness: A Theological Account of the Life and Voice of Mercy Amba Oduyoye", unpublished doctoral dissertation. (Divinity School of Duke University, 2017) 21.

<sup>15</sup> Musa W. Dube. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Society of Biblical Literature: Georgia and World Council of Churches: Geneva. (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Musa W. Dube. "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible". In Botha (eds.). *Semeia Studies: Twenty-Five Years of Liberation Theology*. Atlanta: SBL (2009), 133-146; 134.

affect African women. And the bible has to be read *vis-a-vis* the realities of women’s experiences of exclusion and marginalization among other things. Understanding that women are constantly marginalised and excluded, Dube unapologetically asks important questions: “How do I read the Bible as a black person who was oppressed through the Bible? How do I read the Bible as a woman, who is often marginalized in church and in the society through biblical texts, which explicitly says, “I do not allow women to speak in church?”<sup>17</sup>. These questions inevitably and subliminally casts light on how women are excluded in various spheres of life.

Chitando and Gabaitse<sup>18</sup> explain that “Dube has written extensively on HIV and the stigma of AIDS, gender inequality and postcolonial feminist interpretations, interrogating Western institutions and traditions that dominate African economies, scholarship, cultures and health sectors.” HIV and AIDS is not an individual’s disease according to Dube “HIV/AIDS works through social injustice. It is an epidemic within other social epidemics of injustice. Thus, where there is poverty, gender inequality, human-rights violation, child abuse, racism, ageism, HIV/AIDS stigma, classism, international injustice, violence, ethnic and sex-based discrimination, HIV/AIDS thrives. While it is undoubtedly true that anyone can get HIV/AIDS, the most marginalized groups – who are subject to the above social conditions – are more vulnerable and likely to lack quality care when infected or sick.”<sup>19</sup> Dube has worked closely with various male theologians on the HIV and AIDS epidemic, notable among them is Ezra Chitando who is also vested in HIV and AIDS conversations and they have both worked closely with Nyambura Njoroge in the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa-EHAIA. Their collaboration has been around the curriculum, conferences research and publication on the HIV and AIDS. She also continues to engage in curriculum development and transformation projects such

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<sup>17</sup> Musa W. Dube, “Africa Praying: Singing the Song of Healing in the Eye of the Storm”, Keynote Address: BOCAIP, NACA & Gaborone DMSAC in celebration of the month of Prayer: University of Botswana Conference Centre (26 September 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Chitando and Gabaitse 2008. “Other Ways of Being a Diviner-Healer:” 31.

<sup>19</sup> Musa Dube. “Introduction: Toward Multi-Sectoral Teaching in a Time of HIV/AIDS” in “HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum” Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes, ed. by Musa W. Dube. (WCC Publications: Geneva, 2003), vi.

as in 2009, Engendering Theological Education with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the previous year 2008 she was engaged in a similar project with the World Council of Churches.

Taking an appreciative inquest, Dube's immense contribution to post-colonial feminist theologies of liberation and HIV and AIDS is a call to gender justice and social transformation. Focusing on Dube's work on postcolonial feminist theology which is deeply entrenched in African women's ability to transcend the normative biblical readings that undermine their humanity, Dube argues that African women subvert the domination of Western understandings and claims over the bible in subtle ways. Dube has argued for alternative ways of reading the bibles that are life-giving for women in Africa. Dube espouses a postcolonial feminist lens to highlight women's experiences with the bible, religion, and culture. African women read the bible to glean hope and use their indigenous cultural understanding as a heuristic tool to engage and convey new meanings. One of the concepts that Dube has used in postcolonial feminist readings is *Talitha Cum*.

## Talitha Cum!

Mark 5:41 where the concept of *Talitha cum* is drawn from, refers to a little girl that had died and her father went to seek her resurrection from Jesus. Jesus called her out and she arose! The Circle has used this metaphor to bring to life the dead situations in African women's lives. When religion, culture, economy, politics and so on have killed women's ingenuity, resourcefulness, and innovation *Talitha Cum* calls women back to life in all its fullness. Calling back to life is one of the ways that the Circle theologizes; Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro<sup>20</sup> who are also influential, impactful, leading writers and founding matriarchs of the Circle, edited a volume with the title- *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*. The first part of the title is the same metaphor for Talitha Cum, this volume brought together essays from Circle members on rituals in Africa and how these rituals impact women. African rituals are religious and cultural in nature as Mercy Oduyoye<sup>21</sup> has argued, African women "write about controversial elements of life in Africa, such as

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<sup>20</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro. *The Will to Arise*, 1.

culture, sexuality, *rituals* and rites of passage. These elements of life are part of their *religion*". The will to arise/Talitha Cum underscores the implication of ritual in African societies and its heavy weight on the shoulders of women. One of the metaphors that Dube uses in her scholarship is Talitha Cum as she calls women to life, to engage in life affirming theologizing. Dube challenges all the dynamics that negate African women's dignity and human rights. Talitha Cum suggests significant analyses of long held beliefs and theologizing approaches, demonstrating the colonial and patriarchal positions within such beliefs. To achieve the transformation necessary to empower women, the Talitha Cum framework is vital as it calls women back to the circle of life. Dube has written articles and given keynote speeches and public lectures with the title Talitha Cum over ten times as her curriculum Vitae shows. This is a demonstration of the importance and commitment that she has toward African women arising!

History demonstrates how African women have often been written about by the West and also by African men, this is why her-story<sup>22</sup> is an important concept in Circle theologizing. Her-story is history written from a feminist view by women about women's involvement in historical progressions that may have been written by men previously. Talitha cum invites African women to find the will and then to arise and take their position in scholarship, leadership, in religious spaces, economic, political spaces and within their communities. Metaphorically conceived as dead, *Talitha cum* is a call for African women's resurrection from all forms of oppression and death dealing forces that have often excluded, marginalized and continue to kill women metaphorically, psychologically, economically, emotionally, culturally, religiously and also physically. To inspire women to be able to find the will within themselves to arise, the Circle and Dube to be precise, have continued to demonstrate that inequality in society affects women more than men. Dube recognizes that often it is the responsibility of women to help other women arise and shape her-story to change the future. Dube points out how it is often in

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<sup>22</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Sarojini Nadar, and Betty Govinden. *Her Stories: Hidden Histories of African Women of Faith in Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002).

the poverty-stricken regions of the world that this marginalisation, exclusion of women is worse,<sup>23</sup> Africa continues to suffer the legacies of injustice and always seem to be at the receiving end of resources that requires a humane living. In that regard, Dube explains that Talitha Cum is a hermeneutic that calls for:

living in the resurrection space: the art of continually rising against the powers of death, the powers of patriarchy, the powers of colonial oppression and exploitation the powers that produce and perpetuate poverty disease and all forms of exclusion and dehumanization. Walking in the ways of Kimpa Vita, African women' Talitha Cum hermeneutics are ways of staying alive even when one confronts oppressive powers that crushes, one dares to rise.<sup>24</sup>

Talitha Cum is a metaphor for seeking justice, liberation, emancipation and equal rights for women to be able to competently engage the injustices that have rendered them excluded. Other ways of reading the bible for the resurrection of women and their experiences draws again on post-colonial feminist reading. In her contribution to contextual theologies and African women experiences, Dube has argued that Christian baptism which symbolizes dying with Christ meant for Africans that they had to die to their African culture as well and adopt a Christian name because their African names were deemed 'pagan'.<sup>25</sup>

Talitha Cum invites African women to arise in their full humanity, in their African-ness and their identity to create a space that recognizes them as African and as women. African women who resisted their identity being given up in the name of conversion to Christianity like Kimpa Vita are acknowledged and affirmed to inspire African women in faith communities. Dube writes about Kimpa Vita, a Congolese woman who accepted Christianity and was given a Christian name as was customary

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<sup>23</sup> Dube. "Talitha Cum! Calling the Girl-Child and Women to Life in the HIV/AIDS & Globalization Era", presented to the Women's Commission Meeting of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), Johannesburg, Feb. 12-13, 2002, 71-93; 77.

<http://koed.hu/talitha/musa.pdf> [Accessed 30 January 2023].

<sup>24</sup> Dube, Musa (2009). "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible," In Botha, eds. *Semeia Studies: Twenty-Five Years of Liberation Theology*. Atlanta: SBL, 133.

<sup>25</sup> Dube. "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible", 134.

when Africans converted to Christianity. She argues that Kimpa Vita was crisscrossing between the colonial Christianity and her African roots.

"Kimpa Vita/Dona Beatrice, with her lifetime round-trip ticket, her crisscrossing foot marks, had brought black paint into the white colonial church, painting Jesus, his disciples, and his mother black and asserting that this black Jesus would restore the kingdom of Congo. Clearly, Kimpa Vita had not died to her Congolese world when she accepted colonial Christian conversion, 'civilization' and a new name, Dona Beatrice."<sup>26</sup>

Dube argues that while the Christian mission enterprise and colonialism worked hand in hand to erase the African identities, African people were negotiating covertly and in subtle ways how they could hold both Christianity and Africanness in tension. Kimpa Vita is one such woman who held both Christianity and her African-ness in tension- arising with both Christianity and African-ness yet sturdier than both.

In many ways, what Dube has argued with regard to Talitha Cum is that African women can arise from suppression, exclusion, marginalization, and oppression by intentionally presenting themselves not as "dead and buried colonized African Christian woman with a new name" rather as women of African soil and with the power to resurrect themselves as whole African women. Dube further charges that "Resurrection is the power to come back against powers of annihilation and the powers of colonial domination. It is the art of insisting on the right to be alive and to live freely."<sup>27</sup> When African women rise and resurrect themselves with intentional awareness of their African-ness, they call for decolonization of their identities, race, minds and all life's aspects that have been colonized, dehumanized, excluded and denied life. By refusing to believe and accept what the colonial project and Christian mission enterprises wanted the African people to be (inferior race, inferior gender, inferior culture, inferior religion and so on), Kimpa Vita used a form of resistance that allows one to cross borders of identities and interrogates how such a belief can be flipped over to addresses patriarchal, colonial, capitalist, racist, tribalist, sexual and all forms of discrimination among other life-denying social factors.

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<sup>26</sup> Dube. "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible", 135.

<sup>27</sup> Dube. "Talitha Cum! Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible", 136.

## Language

One of the tools that colonialism and Christianity used to disempower the African continent was language. Language can be a tool of oppression in various ways, Bell Hooks<sup>28</sup> asserted “I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize.” The way in which language is used to dominate and oppress has been experienced in Africa and many other places where people were colonized and enslaved. The language of oppression that marginalises, inferiorizes and excludes many. Dube argues, about how colonialism and colonial language capitalized on language to disempower, “the narrative of darkness was weaved in modern colonial times as a rhetorical device of legitimizing the domination of Africa and its people. The rhetoric of darkness and heathenism sought to invite a certain illumination with the medicine of gospel and western civilization... darkness is an ideology of alienating all that does not correspond with the west and to domination by creating western imitators.”<sup>29</sup> Various indigenous African ideas, values were demonized as a way to disempower Africans. Missionaries often worked with colonial officials and in the process claimed that African names were to be replaced with Western or usually coated as biblical/Christian names, a name like Thembeke for instance would be replaced with Edith as a Christian name. This was an approach that engraved mental hatred of being African in a subtle way for many Africans. Language can be used to empower, and inspire, and it can also be used to disempower and dehumanize. Dube recognizes how language has been used to scorn African women and men and uses language as a tool to resist and explicitly make awareness of colonial legacies in her postcolonial feminist scholarship. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is a case in point, Dube writes, “In this extremely gendered colonial language, the African continent was being penetrated by the West, its male subjugator, and inseminated with

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<sup>28</sup> Bell Hooks. “Language of Power”, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 167-175.  
<https://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-7/hooks-on-the-language-of-power> [Accessed on 28 February 2023].

<sup>29</sup> Musa Dube. “Decolonizing the Darkness: Bible Readers and the Colonial Cultural Archive.” In *Soundings in Cultural Criticism*, 31-44. (1517 Media; Fortress Press, 2013).

Western seed to give birth to the Westernized African.”<sup>30</sup> The African continent was being penetrated by the West continuously and at the same time depleting its resources that Africans could not access in their own countries on their own continent. “Subjugated and penetrated” can easily be seen as symbolic rape because the West did not seek permission to penetrate Africa. Recognizing how high the stakes are for African women and Africans at large, what is said and written about African women, who writes their history, how they write that history in the way that they do is critical. And therefore, where the colonial and missionary enterprise is romanticized, Dube is emboldened to tell her-story unequivocally.

Writing about the theology of the University of Western Cape, Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke argue that “narrative stakes are indeed high—who gets to tell the history of theology at UWC, how they tell it, and why they choose to tell it in the ways that they do are enormously important because such a history not only shapes the future but also speaks powerfully to the present.”<sup>31</sup> Language has many times been used to violate those who seemingly have no power, in this case African women. Dube refuses to bow to the colonial language that so easily dehumanizes African women and has chosen to use the same tool, language, to give an indigenous understanding of the violence that colonialism exerted on the continent. Her African postcolonial feminist reflections “demonstrate how decoloniality and Black liberation talk are appropriated for colonial ends.”<sup>32</sup> For instance, beads that are an important tool of communication in some African nations were demonized in the name of Christianizing the African continent, indigenous names were seen as of less value, upon converting to Christianity, one had to adopt a ‘Christian name’ (Western) and lose their African name. Rites of passage that are crucial to the African understanding of their reality were deemed outdated if not pagan. Using the terms ‘pagan and demonic’ is language that is aimed at causing the people to see the rites as evil, therefore should not be engaged further. and it was effective in rendering Africans to hate themselves,

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<sup>30</sup> Musa Dube. 2012. “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke. “Of Theological Burglaries and Epistemic Violence: Black Theology, Decoloniality, and Higher Education”, in *Ecumenical Review* 74/4 (2022), 548.

<sup>32</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke “Of Theological Burglaries and Epistemic Violence: Black Theology, Decoloniality, and Higher Education”, 549.

their culture their beliefs and identity. The Colonization of Africa was a well thought out plan that has lingered decades after the physical colonization ended. As Marcus Garvey stated in his speech in 1937 his words popularized by Bob Marley in a song titled Redemption Song, “emancipate yourselves from mental slavery non but ourselves can free our minds”.<sup>33</sup> These words reveal that the impact of colonization and slavery was not only physical but impacted other spheres of life such as psychological, economic, political and emotional. Hugo Hinfelaar establishes that there was intense planning for the colonization of Africa:

A Conference held in Berlin had precipitated what became known as the scramble for Africa. The continent was being carved up to become the colonial possessions of the Great Powers of Europe. Livingstone, and a number of Protestant missionaries, had travelled extensively through un-charted territory and had enthused Scotland with the idea of a Christian conquest of Africa summarized in the motto of the three C’s: Civilization, Christianity and legal Commerce.<sup>34</sup>

Time was spent planning, engaging ideas and the language of the colonial project and how to have it effectively. Dube<sup>35</sup> bemoans that “African communities and their lands were, of course, neither consulted nor invited to the Berlin Conference. The participants were Western European powers, traders, and their missionaries. Africa, surrounded by numerous suitors, did not have the choice to choose a suitor nor to refuse one.” She speaks and writes boldly when she exposes the evils of injustice and oppression, she explicitly says it in ways that will speak the stamp and the impact that colonialism and all forms of oppression has left on the African continent.

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<sup>33</sup> Mendy Toney F. “A Call for Liberation in Redemption Song: “Emancipate Yourself from Mental Slavery””. <https://zambianobserver.com/a-call-for-liberation-in-redemption-song-emancipate-yourself-from-mental-slavery/> [Accessed on 14 November 2022].

<sup>34</sup> Hugo Hinfelaar, 2007. *Footsteps on the Sand of Time: A life of Bishop Jan van Sambeek*. Rome: Society of Missionaries of Africa, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Musa W. Dube, 2012. “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives”, in *Society of Biblical Literature Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Vol. 13, ed. by Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, 1-26. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 3.

## Embodied Scholarship

One evening, I was with my family when I received a call from Dube. I had her number saved on my phone because there was something I had been meaning to seek her advice on but had not done so yet. I had never spoken to her before in any way, I had used her work in my theological studies, and I am yet to meet her in person. I was elated to receive her call yet at the same time wondered why she would call me. When I answered the phone call, and she spoke, I was made to feel at home, she introduced herself, then asked if I would consider working on a volume for the Circle pioneering matriarchs' biographies. The sense of being recognized as having the potential to carry out this work was overwhelmingly delightful. And over the next few weeks we spoke and began to select who could be a part of the editorial team on the volume and spoke frequently. I have been looking forward to meeting her in person and contributing this chapter is an honour and a humongous privilege for me. Having several conversations with her, I began to note how mentorship for her is not a theory rather a praxis and something that needs embodying. Feminist scholarship is often an embodied scholarship. Dube embodies her feminist scholarship through mentorship, she takes this role of mentoring rising stars of the Circle very seriously and seeks to impart as much as she can on all who will learn. Often, older women in African communities would mentor younger women to take up various leadership positions in their communities. Among the Bemba people of Zambia *bana cimbusa*<sup>36</sup> mentored younger women for agency, after the younger women went through *imbusa* teachings (pre-marital teaching for the bride rite of passage). As the current continental Circle coordinator, Dube has been calling young scholars to rise and the buzz name has been 'rising stars.' She has been calling rising stars to rise, Talitha Cum and make their mark. There is a wave of excitement as rising stars get calls for papers to contribute book chapters, journal articles and poems! She is indeed a mentor who does not stop at research but also shares opportunity for career advancements and scholarships for further studies. Having written over 225 scholarly works and counting, Dube is inspirational because she recognizes that the way to continue with African scholarship by African women, is to mentor one another and 'pull one another up'. This transposes me back to a Bemba adage that says *ukwenda babili*

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<sup>36</sup> Older women that are sought by the bride's mother to give a young bride marital gems and agency.

*temwenso* which can be interpreted as; having company or being accompanied by someone emboldens us. Dube signifies the concepts above in her mentorship by bringing the hermeneutic of life, community engagement, other ways that affirm women's lives. Her mentorship is exemplary as she offers women space to exercise their agency using the multiplicity of African women theologies of life.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on Dube's African postcolonial feminist reading of the bible and two key concepts of her theologizing and how these distinct markers have contributed to Circle theology. Dube embodies her theologizing through her mentorship of rising stars in the Circle. Dube is one of the most creative, innovative, noteworthy and instrumental African women theologians, a significant global figure in postcolonial feminist scholarship. Dube is not only convinced of her scholarship, but she also embodies it to inspire young African women to rise and write their own herstories. She continues to call rising stars in African scholarship to rise, to fly and to never be left behind. the dark beauty of African theological imaginations. She uses language as a tool to speak truth to power and to explicitly point out the wrongs and evils of colonialism, sexism, racism and reflecting on how language can be utilized for African women's flourishing. Her feminist postcolonial passion intersects with her intentional critical social engagement and contributes to women's flourishing, rising and shaping their own her-story.in the search to contribute to making a difference in the world.

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### 3 | **Bosadi Theology of Masenya Madipoane (Ngwana ‘Mphahlele)**

*Lerato Mokoena*

#### **Abstract**

The 1980s and 1990s are the formative years of gender-specific frameworks in biblical feminist interpretation. Scholars used this opportunity to formulate the unintelligible and the muted through interesting dialectics to fashion an archive without imitations of frameworks that excluded them and treated them as subjects. Amid these conditions of creating and understanding, Madipoane Masenya heralded a moment in this period and seized an ideological opportunity to jump-start Bosadi Theology as a matter of intellectual insurgency. Masenya played around the tensions of race, patriarchy, sexism, classism, and even colonialism and Apartheid to examine the social and intimate lives of black South African women. It was a necessary intervention as it sought to contextualize South African black and African women's unique experiences. This intellectual insurgency resulted from the lack of correct antagonistic grammar that Euro-feminist frameworks provided. There was no way they could fashion the nervous condition of being black and being a woman and banishment. Those imported frameworks were gaslighting black women unleashing scandalous and boundless violence, and making it impossible for black women to be interlocutors in this ideation space. There was a grammar of uncivil, gratuitous, and predatory ubiquitous violence through epistemic canons. Madipoane had a dilemma as a black intellectual, an enormous urgency regarding the spiritual, existential, and psycho-cultural dimensions of black women in South Africa. This chapter aims to trace the theological anthropology of Masenya, her sources of intellect, wisdom, and care for the quality of black women's lives through a liberatory framework of *Bosadi* Theology in the South African Biblical Studies scene.

**Keywords:** Bosadi Theology, biblical feminist interpretation, liberatory framework and Masenya Madipoane

## Introduction: *Bosadi* is not a broad church

I have a particularly heightened sensitivity to liberatory frameworks that emerged for the benefit of black life. I say black life because to theorize about the Negro is to theorize about gender, so totalizing should not be taken to mean the absence of gender and even class contradictions. *Bosadi* is such a theory of freedom that also becomes the scene of abjection in theological terms for black life and women, although I will explain why I feel *Bosadi* totalizes the black experience. *Bosadi* becomes a valuable rubric for abjection and influences performance, studies, aesthetics, theorization, and engaged theories about black life, *ispo facto* black women within theology and beyond. Masenya (2005:179-194) has characterized *Bosadi* as "necessary" in *their hermeneutics was strange! Ours is a necessity!* A necessary intervention to combat "strange biblical hermeneutics." Masenya has always written from the premise of critiquing androcentrism, creating a focused interpretative lens. It looks on the surface that Masenya is simply critiquing patriarchy, but I argue that it is much more complex than a reducible category. Patriarchy has a host antagonism; in this case, imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It is important to frame this context so I can easily explain why *Bosadi* is not a broad church.

*Bosadi* is a black woman's standpoint, an interpretative lens of a woman who grows up in the early sixties of an anti-black regime committed to genocide because simply saying Apartheid does not quite capture the violence of such a regime, and since the word apartheid has been appropriated in so many ways around the world (i.e., Zionism and the occupation of Palestine), that also threatens how we come to speak about the white on black hatred in South Africa and our irreducible experiences. Globally Apartheid means systems of separateness and segregation, but within the South African context, it is separateness and segregation and discrimination based on skin color. I call this practice theoretical convolution, my own coinage that means; the geopolitics of knowledge of a concept that is reappropriated in different contexts to refer to oppression that symbolically infers the same idea but refers to oppression that ranges with its social practices based on ontology.

Theoretical convolution poses a few dangers in how we tell history and how we relate our personal experiences. Firstly, it takes away from those who have been harmed a portion of their voice, especially if this reappropriation takes part on a large scale that poses as a contender geopolitically

because that would mean more coverage. Secondly, it pays little attention to the particularities of ontology and how the universality of concepts without the sensitivity to differences perpetuates harm. Lastly, it fails to distinguish between intellectual preoccupation with ideas and experimenting with a freedom that challenges forms of existence. Indeed, multiple voices joining the discussion about oppression serve the purpose of delegitimizing and deprivileging mainstream positivist ideologies, but that should not be at the expense of subsiding erasure and maintaining categories of negation through liberalism.

Through the years, Masenya's works have received critical acclaim, world recognition, and interpretations, and it is, without doubt, she will go down in history as a pioneer. Her work has encouraged black women's resistance by challenging prevailing approaches to oppression in theology and civil society. Chief among many responses from *Bosadi* theology is generating a black consciousness in black women and MEN. *Bosadi* adopted, even without knowing at times, a heuristic healing approach that condemned patriarchy as a social disease that threatened both black men and women. Please note my instance of using black throughout because I want to argue that *Bosadi* is NOT a broad church. What is surprising, however, is what we have witnessed as we have with many black liberatory frameworks and ideas: their adoption by white people, in this instance, white women. Although we have biological similarities and experience contradictions that mirror one another, we do not share a grammar of suffering. This is a particular interest to note because if we agree that the host antagonism of patriarchy is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, then white women benefit from our oppression by being white.

The position of the white woman has been an interesting one in history because of her formlessness; she can be an oppressor and victim all at once. White women are complicit in black oppression and genocide, which should be noted because their engagement with feminism makes them look like a subordinate group and obscures their gains from oppression by being white people and not just white women, while black women are lesser human beings; that is the difference. Black women are oppressed because they are black and they are women; they deal with interlocking systems of oppression. That has been well documented and deliberated, and I don't wish to expound further on this debate, but it was necessary to note. Masenya writes that for black women and *Bosadi* to be reappropriated by dominant narratives that have enjoyed the luxury of

institutional honor is unfair. Bosadi is not just an abstract theory in the corridors of biblical historiography; it is a life-giving form of protest; it allows black women to dream and offers us comradery; Bosadi is a sacred text by a black woman for black women.

Between activism, religiosity, and the public sphere: the intellectual insurgency of Masenya I borrow the title for this subsection from a critical text titled *Between Activism, Religiosity, and the Public Sphere: The Intellectual insurgency of bell hooks* by Hue Woodson. An essential essay for genealogies of thought, I feel, pays the exact homage it does for bell hooks that I also wish to relay about Masenya, who traces her intellectual heritage, or "critical consciousness" as she calls it, to "early experiences in the Black church and with religion in general, to the extent that her role as an intellectual is predicated on "spiritual practice." (Woodson 2019:187).

Masenya, in a short auto introduction about herself, traces her critical consciousness to a "journey of struggle" (Masenya 2005:180). It is no big wonder what struggle she is alluding to; Masenya grew up in Apartheid South Africa. However, within the struggle of the regime that discriminated against and murdered you because you were black, Masenya, in the everyday occurrence of segregated bathrooms and living areas, realized that there was also separation based on gender and sex. So, Masenya grew up in a white male-dominated world. However, although places were reserved between black and white, dilapidated and well kept, male or female, white women entered where white men entered while in black spaces, the system primarily upheld and enforced the binaries. This was to create an essential tactic to divide and conquer amongst black men and women, alien residents.

Therefore, Bosadi must be inducted into the school of black abjection, black social life, and the social construction of black feminism thought. Masenya (2005:180) chronicles that it took her time to be able to appreciate the racial crisis she was born to as she says;

My inability to realize the severity of the racial crisis was, in my view, caused by the fact that I could not interact with white folks regularly. Such an interaction could have enabled me to develop a better understanding of the evil nature of the apartheid policy. This policy advocated the separate development of people of different races, deliberately making one race the norm for all others.

This form of awareness thwarts one into an examination that requires the subject to discover their blackness. This is the case even for Fanon, who was thrown into his corporeal malediction through relationality, "Look, a negro!". I argue that Masenya lacked not an understanding or appreciation of the regime through relationality but an encounter with her corporeality through a process of negation. You are black because you are not white, not because you have not encountered white people, but because the anti-black system defines your humanity, thereby inferring whiteness as the totality.

Masenya experienced intersecting forms of oppression, including low-quality and state-sanctioned education that did not offer enough knowledge to transform society or address social ills. Geographically she lived in segregation, and all of these circumstances provided her with a reality that was deprived of humanity and hermeneutics that was out of touch with the realities of her people. She encountered a theology at the time that was predominantly white and male. Although theology at the time was characterized in this manner and was an exclusive exercise for the elite in ivory towers far removed from the people, she was still able to theologize about her reality by fashioning her grammar of suffering. She was a theologian long before she became one.

It is no surprise that religion was an anchor for black social life; it was a refugee ideology under oppression. Tracing her critical consciousness to religiosity meant that much of her criticism would be centered around discrimination and oppression in religious spaces. This is the space she was most drawn to and one that shaped her views about life and the world; this was her sociology. Within this context of oppression and radical practices of open rebellion through text and riot, a theology that would benefit liberation emerged not only for her but for black public and academic intellectuals.

The emergence of liberation theology was a way to cement the experiences of black people in the public archive and to theorize about the black experience concerning anti-blackness under religion. The dilemma of the black intellectual is always this, because of multiple and multi-faceted intersections of oppression, one seldom finds it challenging to define oneself with a niche; Masenya is not just an Old Testament scholar; she is a public intellectual, a proponent of black social life, a liberation theologian. Her formlessness meant she could stand in place for several issues, theorize, provide social commentary, protest, oppose, curate, and live all

at once. It is also essential to mention that she lived because black activism is often defined by protest in ways that can sometimes deny or take away one's humanity. She shares the same sentiment as she articulates (2005:182);

At that point, I began a painful journey as I started fighting for the liberation of African- South African women through writing, speaking, and living.

Notwithstanding, Masenya, however, became particularly afflicted by patriarchal violence, as she mentions (2005:182);

Perhaps it is no wonder that, in my case, it was only in the early 1990s that I became aware of the harsh realities of patriarchy in the academy and the churches. Once I was introduced to feminist and womanist theologies and biblical interpretation, I would never be the same again.

It is easy to argue that her focus was inspired by her biological realities, which I differ against because I do not believe that women choose activism of this kind; we are thrown into *Dasein* by virtue of being women, so we do not have the luxury to choose. She decided *what to do* about it, which separated her from the rest. And so, began the journey of being a theologian for Masenya.

"I would never be the same again." echoes Masenya; I want us to pay particular undivided attention to this sentiment as it will define the politics of Bosadi, interpretation, and implementation. In saying, "I was never the same again," Masenya should tell us if she has ever been to herself because she possesses a subjecthood that has been banished from the categories of what it means to be human. This is because the advent of curating an idea that will serve as the means to the end for your liberation is born out of alienation.

Masenya enters the academy and orientates her position as a curator of the black religious experience. Might I add this entry was not that of Palm Sunday, in Alice Walker fashion, "all her life she had to fight!" which does not come as a *groot skok* because she was disrupting business as usual, as she states (2005:182);

I have fought in the academy, which remains both basically white and consequently foreign to the African context, six and also predominantly male and therefore less concerned with women's issues. I have also fought in the church, which, though black, remains male regarding its leadership and decision-making practices. It is a church that has continued to marginalize and push aside the female folk through foreign—

mainly colonial, Apartheid, and male-biblical interpretations. I have fought in a predominantly African context whose male folk, although acknowledging the rights of people of all races enshrined by the South African constitution, in practice, still believe that the full humanity of women can only be affirmed in the public sphere of work and not in the realm of church or home. My struggle to establish the full humanity of African women in this country is motivated by my desire to discover my self-identity as a human being created in the image of God. It is inspired by the desire to call myself by my name and in my voice.

One cannot help but feel irked by the emotions conjured up by this quote that almost reads like a Rivonia trial speech because, generally, oppression is annoyingly sad, and reading how she had to struggle makes me appreciate her work more.

### **The rubric of Bosadi theology**

Despite all the pushback, nothing could stop Masenya such that she even went on; fuelled by the desire to call herself by her name and to establish her and black women's humanity, she went on to do her Ph.D. in Biblical Studies, specialization in Old Testament titled "Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Approach." she explains this body of work as (2005:183);

focused not only on the sociohistorical context of the text of Prov 31 but, even more importantly, on the contexts/social locations of African-South African women readers of biblical texts.

Masenya, while writing her Ph.D.-thesis, mentions that she sincerely appreciated the reader's critical role during the hermeneutical process. She is in line with the tradition of deconstructive scholars like Spivak and Derrida; her criticism of textuality and worlding deconstructs binary oppositions between the text and the world. The term worlding is a Spivak register "that refers to ways in which writing in general, or textuality, has provided a rhetorical structure to justify imperial rule" (Morton 2003:19). The Bible is an imperial text. We have seen how many imperial texts are instrumental and subsidize practices of erasure.

We observe in her narrative practices that she often uses the method of autoethnography, connecting her personal experiences to the broader social, political, and cultural contexts that have come to shape her worldview. Her citational and writing practices also reconstruct the myth

of objectivity and what scientific scholarship means. She describes her methods as "socially engaged with academics but also engaged with grassroots and communities." (2005:183). The dangers of ethnomethodology in social sciences and humanities is well noted; we are well aware of its risks since the way ethnography is composed, sometimes our narrative practices impose distortive interpretative frames on another people's experience.

I argue that Masenya was well aware of the risks of ethnomethodology since it is such a slippery slope, especially when we link such methods to discourses about theories of more significant socio-political questions, i.e., colonialism and imperialism. I argue this point confidently because, in Masenya, we find that she aims to delink from grand narratives through ethnomethodology instead of reading herself into texts. She uses the text as a blueprint to identify dominant representations of worlding; by identifying them, she now knows what does not fit into her reality, a process I call transparent representation unbinding. Masenya (2005:184) alludes to this and says, "Although the *mosadi* reader acknowledges the significance of the contexts that produced the biblical texts, the context of the modern female reader takes priority over the former."

The logical conclusion of transparent representation unbinding is the naming process; after delinking from grand narratives, one must compose a rigor and register that shapes their new reality. Masenya calls it Bosadi (womanhood) theology. A term that guides her hermeneutical practices and how she now engages with the text that once defined her subjectivity with negation and terror. The politics of etymology are not indexical to Bosadi theology since we need to ask, what's in a name? Why Bosadi and not something else? The easy answer is that Bosadi aligns with Masenya's ethical foundations and presents as the most accessible syntactical tool for deploying a concept.

A more comprehensive answer to the question is that *Masenya ke Mosadi* encapsulates a world of meaning. It is a placeholder for those whom the naming processes of grand narratives cannot conceive of. Masenya ke Mosadi becomes a clarion call and an invitation; *Ha Masenya e le Mosadi le nna ke Mosadi mos?* It snaps one out of proverbial slumber, creates a connection between worlds we conceive of as separate, and makes them collide. In this way, *Bosadi* also sets out its terms of relationality through sociology rather than phylogeny. Bosadi, in this manner, unmasks delusions of grandiosity imposed by false consciousness and bad faith.

Bosadi also creates relatedness through affirmation and indigenously, in her own words:

Reclaiming the use of the Northern Sotho word *bosadi* not only makes sense to African-South African women at the grassroots level, women with whom I constantly interact, and thus naturally, it also succeeds in enabling these women to read the Bible in a way that affirms them, because the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of African-South African women.

Bosadi theology is faithful to its founding principles through form and style. Masenya as a teacher in an institution that was initially devised to disseminate thoughts of the elite and ruling class writes in intelligible language that is far removed from the complex strategies of language we encounter in the academy. She often writes in Sesotho and defies the rule of grammar by direct translation only when necessary and sometimes leaves the Sesotho as it is to contain its meaning, strategy, and impact within the text. Scholars that have engaged with Masenya, interpreted and even reproduced her work, have also taken to this practice as they are often found using SeSotho idioms and words and not directly translating phrases, as I have also done in this paper. That is her influence.

Since Bosadi is an encounter, encounters often depend on how we identify after encountering it. Naming is integral to theory and self-identification in Bosadi; it either gives us new names or makes us reclaim and abandon the ones we prefer. Self-defining is a crucial concept in Bosadi theology through a practice called radical withholding. A practice of refusing to be called otherwise and retaining one's identity. The situation of blacks in general but black women in particular in South Africa has been precarity and nervousness with relative autonomy and lack of agency. Understanding this situatedness for Masenya is essential for intellectual work; as such, how we define ourselves and reclaim our won histories and legacies becomes agitation for change.

The change such an endeavour envisions aligns with writing black women into existence and cements their roles in a history they have been written out of (Masenya 1995:189). *Bosadi* theology offers a rubric of agency, one that moves away from pathology as often; black women are pathologized more than they are humanized; therefore, Masenya supplies a rubric of affirmation that is in short supply.

## The legacy of *Bosadi* theology in Biblical Studies

Bosadi has found resonance amongst a broad audience at home and abroad and has been reappropriated in myriad ways to mirror different realities, as Masenya (2005:183) explains:

The word *mosadi* (woman) is also used in other African-South African languages, such as the Nguni (*umfazi*), Venda (*musadzi*), Xitsonga (*wansati*), and Setswana (*mosadi*), a fact revealing the essential commonalities of language and experience among the various indigenous peoples of South Africa.

It must be noted that Masenya does not share in my view of bosadi not being a broad church; Masenya has always been open to different interpretations and audiences. Be as it may, Bosadi theology has gone on to redefine, shape worldviews and make sense of realities. This is a view I partly share here, with the exception that it remains to be for the benefit of black life. Within the struggle for absolute autonomy, where prevailing narratives have failed to represent the realities of black people and women in particular, Bosadi has sufficed to offer an alternative and become a placeholder. As Masenya has emphasized in her work, Bosadi sought to correct the gender, class, and racial binaries and ineffectiveness by rewriting and redressing from below. For this reason, I premise black men and women as being in the underbelly before anyone else.

There are many ambitious projects about Masenya's works that I would not want to give attention to here as I am working on a separate project to address this and will only focus here on intellectual work that illuminates the sociology of black life through delicate processes of care and honor. I am unwavering in my position of reducing *Bosadi* to black people's experiences because, as a refugee theory, it is not just a collection of the best accessible scenarios, as we see in how euro-feminist frameworks present themselves and do not do much in terms of harm reduction. *Bosadi* expands and complicates the objectives of feminisms that are opaque and opens space to be more sensitive to questions of difference and intellectual heritages that are not mainstream.

In my view, Masenya's reputation as a theorist was sealed when black scholars began to cite her work, further highlighting her influence as a critical scholar (i.e., Mothoagae 2019; Baloyi 2019; Dube 2016; Mokoena 2021; Chisale 2020; Mudimeli 2014; Mtshiselwa 2016; Ramantshwana 2015; Olejede 2018; Phiri 2015). I am particularly elated about this because, due to centuries of epistemic violence and coloniality of knowledge, black

scholars have struggled to privilege their own through text; we often herald others as heroes and thought leaders, a practice we are unlearning. We also note how, generally, black scholarship is regarded as anarchist and in a state of constant rage, inducing nausea, suffering from institutional doubt, and lacking epistemic authority and honor.

The growing importance of Bosadi theology is of commendable proportions, and it has become challenging in a good way, of course, to do any work in Old Testament studies in South Africa without referencing Masenya. When the broader influence of Masenya is in the sociology of black life, a more focused impact of Masenya's work is on women's studies and feminist theory. She has increasingly been vocal in her criticism of global development and policies that affect women, which is noted in a number of her publications that speak to governance, education, and issues like HIV/AIDS (Masenya 2005; Masenya 2005b; Masenya 1997).

It is no doubt that Masenya's work will continue to influence and shape the worldviews of many upcoming young theologians. Her work represents critique for critical times and will forever remain relevant since we are in a constant state of impoverishment and a world that constantly needs vital analysis.

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## 4 | L. Juliana M. Claassens at the Theological Gate

*Funlola O. Olojede*

### **Abstract**

This chapter focuses on the unique features of Juliana Claassens' theological work within the historical, socio-cultural, economic and religious context that motivated her approaches. It follows the trajectory of Claassens' theological thinking and how she has been able to navigate various issues of discrimination and prejudice that stem from patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, tribalism, sexuality and disability, among other social factors, using diverse sources that include novels, films and music, besides Scriptures. In addition, the essay investigates how Claassens' work has dialogued with other theologies, specifically African male theologies, Global South theologies, and Western feminist theologians. The conclusion highlights Claassens' main contributions to the world of knowledge and liberation as well as its potential applications to the future world and work.

**Keywords:** Theology, discrimination, African male theologies, Global South theologies, Western feminist theologians, liberation and Juliana Claassens

### **Introduction**

In 1993, after more than 130 years of offering theological and ministry training, the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU) graduated a set of theological students which featured a lone female among twenty-eight males. Young L. Juliana Claassens was the sixth female to graduate from SU's Faculty of Theology, which graduated its first female

students in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Claassens graduated on the eve of the demise of apartheid and the birth of democracy in South Africa, but what is remarkable is that her class also was exclusively white and the product of what was prior to that time an all-white institution. Despite being nurtured theologically in such a circumscribed and discriminatory environment, Claassens went on to evolve as a theologian whose scholarship and relationships transcend race and gender. In 1999, she obtained a PhD in Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, USA under the supervision of the renowned Professor Katharine D. Sakenfeld. She then taught at several seminaries and colleges in the USA before her appointment as Associate Professor of Old Testament in Stellenbosch in 2010.<sup>2</sup> This essay examines Claassens scholarship and engagement with the Circle of Concerned African Women's Theologians (the Circle). The central question asked here is: How has Claassens contributed to the theologies of liberation in the region, continent, and the world, in view of the long-standing tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in Southern Africa? In what ways does Claassens' theology compliment, reinforce or intersect with the theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of the Circle in South Africa such as Christina Landman, Denise Ackerman, Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), etc. As an Old Testament scholar, Claassens operates in the broad context not only of Old Testament studies in South Africa but also of White hermeneutics (vs Black Hermeneutics) and Feminist (vs Male Hermeneutics). Her social position as a white feminist Old Testament scholar place her in tandem with womanist Old Testament scholars Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Sarojini Nadar but also distinguishes her in the company

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<sup>1</sup> Claassens received four degrees from SU, all with distinction, before proceeding to PTS for her PhD. These are BA Honours in Theological Studies (1993), BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (1994), MA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (1996), and BD (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Juliana Claassens was promoted to full professorship in July 2014, becoming Stellenbosch University's first full female professor of Old Testament. She has served as Head of Department of Old and New Testament, and is currently the Head of the Gender Unit at SU's Faculty of Theology. In addition, she serves as a member of the Society of Biblical Literature's Committee of Status of Women in the Profession, the Chair of the Old Testament Society of South Africa and a member of the board of the Semeia Studies Series of the SBL as well as on the board of Perspectives in Religious Studies, among other roles that testify to her recognition in the guild.

of Denise Ackerman and Christina Landman, white feminist practical theologians. In other words, her social location as a South African feminist thrusts her into the company of these other South African female theologians and helps her to be conscious of her context, as she does not shy away from reflecting on the social ills that predominate in the society, particularly issues of gender-based violence and patriarchy driven oppression of women and other vulnerable groups.

However, there is no doubt that Claassens operates also within the broader milieu of Euro-American feminist frameworks given her American theological training and teaching experience. An ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and of the Presbyterian Church, USA, Claassens reads not only against the grain of Scriptures but also against the grain of orthodoxy and male dominated traditional historical critical methods. But this perspective does not position her as an adversary to male theologians, several of whom she has collaborated with on various projects. These include Gerald West, Alphonso Groenewald and Steed V Davidson.

### **Crux of Claassens' Hermeneutics and Theology**

Claassens employs a diversity of approaches ranging from Feminist to Trauma and Disability studies which attest to the richness and polyphonic character of her work. The focus of her teaching, workshops, conferences and seminars also speaks to her theological thinking, Circle commitment, other activities and publications. Perhaps Juliana Claassens' most notable contribution to scholarship is her research on the intersection of trauma and gender. But her work has not always been centered on these two issues. Before her 10 March 2015 inaugural lecture titled, 'An Abigail Optic: Reading the Old Testament at the intersections,' which became a catalyst to her recent research on the intersection of trauma and gender in the Hebrew Bible, her writings had used feminist lens to read the Old Testament text particularly from the perspective of human dignity.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that prior to that inaugural lecture,

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<sup>3</sup> See LJM Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar and the Quest for Human Dignity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74/4 (2012), 659-674; "Praying from the Depths of the Deep: Remembering the Image of God as Midwife in Psalm 71," *Review and Expositor* 104/4 (2007), 761-776; "Laughter and Tears: Carnivalistic Overtones in the Stories of Sarah and Hagar," *Perspectives*

Claassens had served as the Coordinator of the Human Dignity Project (the former Hope Project) at SU's Faculty of Theology. In that position, she organized four major international conferences on human dignity between 2011 and 2015. Her writings in that period project a clear voice of resistance – resistance to dehumanization in different forms, especially the dehumanization of women and people with disability.

Claassens' vehement resistance of injustice and dehumanization is well articulated and developed in her award-winning book *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Liturgical Press, 2016). The book demonstrates how Old Testament women such as Sarah, Abigail, Rizpah, Tamar, Hagar, Ruth and Naomi, among others, resisted acts of brutalities of war, rape, systemic injustice, patriarchy and poverty in non-violent but effective ways. Her argument is that the stories of these women can be seen as expressions of different ways in which women of old (and of today) resist dehumanization and the violation of their dignity. Contemporizing the stories of these ancient characters, Claassens states pointedly in the introduction of the book that, "To be human means to resist dehumanization," (p. xiii). Moreover, she affirms in the conclusion that, "the brave, creative, and nonviolent acts of resistance of the women in this volume that draw our attention to women all around us who are standing up for justice should indeed inspire us to work for a kinder, more just world in which women, men, and children may truly flourish" (p. 156). For Claassens, therefore, reading biblical texts through the prism of female resistance exposes unjust power structures that undermine women and diminish their worth as full humans, while also helping women to recover their agency. In a sense, this theme of resistance

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in *Religious Studies* 32/3 (2005), 295-308. Reprinted with permission in *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12/2 (2006), 89-110; "Resisting Dehumanization: Acts of Relational Care in Exodus 1-2 as Image of God's Liberating Presence," *Scriptura* 104 (2010:2), 572-580; "Human Dignity in the Prophetic Traditions. Upholding Human Worth in a Context of Dehumanization," *NGTT* 52/1-2 (2011), 34-44; "Countering Stereotypes: Job, Disability and Human Dignity," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 17/2 (2013), 169-183; "Female Resistance in Spite of Injustice: Human Dignity and the Daughter of Jephthah," *OTE* 26/3 (2013), 607-622; "Just Emotions: Reading the Sarah and Hagar Narrative (Genesis 16, 21) through the Lens of Human Dignity," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/2 (2013), Art. #787; "Give us a Portion among Our Father's Brothers: The Daughters of Zelophehad, Land, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *JSOT* 37/3 (2013), 319-337.

is expanded in her recent co-edited anthology on *Transgression and Transformation* in which different authors demonstrate how the ancient people (women in particular) transgressed the status quo to carve out a niche for themselves and uphold their dignity.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of resistance in Claassens' work also surfaces in the output of her foray into disability studies, which culminated in a co-edited volume.<sup>5</sup> Overall, she tries to show the impact of religion on people living with disability. But focusing on the narrative of Job, she helps the reader to not only encounter but also counter the stereotypes embedded in the story of Job, while moving towards a new kind of speech that accords full dignity to those who are differently abled. Her work therefore underscores the importance of values such as compassion, human dignity, justice, and equality in a society that strives for change such as South Africa. In addition, her theological reflections cover other hermeneutical intersections such as postcolonial and queer theories.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 2010, however, traces of trauma analysis had begun to surface in Claassens' essays,<sup>7</sup> but by 2013, it seems there was an evident shift in her conceptual lens, as trauma (and healing) began to take center stage in her writings and scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Drawing largely from the prophetic corpus and some women's narratives, she uses birth imageries of woman in

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<sup>4</sup> *Transgression and Transformation: Feminist, Postcolonial and Queer Biblical Interpretation as Creative Interventions* (LBHOT series; co-edited with Christl Maier, and Funlola O. Olojede. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Theology, Disability and Human Dignity* (co-edited with Leslie Swartz and Len Hansen. Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. "Like a Woman in Labor: Gender, Queer, Postcolonial and Trauma Perspectives on Jeremiah," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (ed. Christl Maier and Carolyn Sharp. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 117-132.

<sup>7</sup> "Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman as Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26/1 (2010), 63-78.

<sup>8</sup> "Like a Woman in Labor"; "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives," *JTSA* 150 (2014), 67-84; "Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma," *OTE* 28/3 (2015), 655-673; "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13):" in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette. Semeia Studies 86, Atlanta/GA:

labor, which had featured strongly in her earlier volume, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* (Westminster John Knox, 2012), to read different portions of the books of Jeremiah, Jonah, and Micah through the lens of trauma. Trauma is also identified in the stories of Tamar's rape (2 Sam 13) and of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Gen 29-30).

Specifically, Claassens explores the intersection of trauma and gender and this is most clearly exemplified in her recent monograph, *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation*, the first book to appear in a new series on The Bible and Trauma (Sheffield Phoenix Press). This monograph builds on themes she had started exploring in her earlier essays on trauma and is significant in several respects. Claassens' *Writing to Survive* highlights the importance of trauma narratives both in the production of texts and in their reception. She explains that traumatized individuals and groups created or reproduced what can be described as "meaning-making art" as they wrote their way through the traumatic experiences that had befallen them. In other words, writing was a means of survival for these trauma-

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SBL Press, 2016), 177-192; "Beyond Revenge? Responsible Bible Reading Practices in a Traumatized Land," *HTS* 73/4 (2017), 1-8; "From Traumatic to Narrative Memories: The Rhetorical Function of Birth Metaphors in Micah 4-5," *Acta Theologica Supp* 26 (2018), 221-236; "The Case of the Trafficked Princesses (Jer 41-44): Trauma Hermeneutics as Pedagogical Tool for Teaching on Gender-Based Violence," in *Teaching for Change: Essays on Pedagogy, Gender, Health and Theology in Africa* (co-edited with Charlene van der Walt, Funlola O. Olojede. Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 2019); "Reading Trauma Narratives: Insidious Trauma in the Story of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29-30) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *OTE* 33/1 (2020), 10-31; *Writing and Reading to Survive: Biblical and Contemporary Trauma Narratives in Conversation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020); "Between Excruciating Pain and the Promise of New Life: Birth Imagery in the Prophets and Trauma Hermeneutics," in *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible: The Bible and Women* Vol 1.2, (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens. Atlanta/GA: SBL, 2021), 315-332; "Jeremiah: The Traumatized Prophet," in *Oxford Handbook to Jeremiah* (ed. Louis Stulman and Ed Silver. Oxford: OUP, 2021), 358-373; "Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as Postcolonial Trauma Narrative," *JSOT* 45/4 (2021), 1-12; "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol: Reading Jonah's Lament in Contexts of Individual and Collective Trauma," *Religions* 13/ 91 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020091>.

tized producers of the text. In the same vein, from the angle of the reception of the text, contemporary and biblical readers, who are experiencing personal or communal trauma, read trauma narratives as a way to make sense of trauma, that is, they are “reading to survive.” Claassens goes further to argue that at the intersection of gender and trauma in both the ancient and the contemporary contexts, biblical trauma narratives exhibit, to some extent, an interplay between individual and collective trauma with collective trauma being a synthesis of individual stories of pain and trauma while individual traumas, in this case, of biblical female characters, also embody or point to collective trauma. Lastly, employing a transdisciplinary approach, Claassens skillfully brings her selected biblical trauma narratives into conversation with some contemporary trauma narratives of women’s experiences, drawn from literary fiction and popular culture. She brings in these narratives to fill in the gaps in what she identifies as the typically male-authored trauma narratives which constitute the biblical tradition. Similarly, she has read the books of Jeremiah, Nahum and Jonah through multiple interpretative lenses by which trauma intersects with gender and postcolonial biblical interpretation.

Besides employing the lens of trauma to look back at the Bible and to probe the world we live in today, Claassens interprets biblical stories from the viewpoint of popular culture. In several of her articles, she has brought biblical stories (and other texts) into conversation with some films and contemporary fictional novels, as she has done in her monograph, *Writing to Survive*. Highlighting gender issues from the biblical text, Claassens has engaged with J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Steven Spielberg’s film production of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and *The Light between Oceans*, among others.<sup>9</sup> Through these

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<sup>9</sup> “A True Disgrace? The Representation of Violence against Women in the Book of Lamentations as well as in JM Coetzee’s Novel *Disgrace*,” in *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family and Violence* (co-edited with Klaas Spronk, Semeia, 2013), 73-90; “Breaking the Silence about Gender Violence? In Conversation with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*” in *Sacred Selves: Essays on Gender, Popular Culture and Religion* (ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Stella Viljoen, Griffel, 2012), 1-18; “Reading Trauma Narratives”. “Transforming God-Language: The Metaphor of God as Abusive Spouse (Ezekiel 16) in Conversation with the Portrayal of God, in *The Color Purple*,” *Scriptura* 113 (2014), 1-11; “Voicing Reproductive Loss: Rachel’s Cry

dialogues with contemporary films and novels, Claassens enables the biblical text to come alive in today's context.

Gender is the unifying element of Claassens' scholarship and it is evident in her writings as well as in her teaching and other academic and public engagements. She is passionate about gender issues, and one of the two quotes she always starts her classes on feminist biblical interpretation with is, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are people." The quote speaks to the heart of her theologizing – the necessity of recognizing and treating women as equal with and not inferior to men. To advance her cause, Claassens took responsibility for the development and oversight of the Gender, Health, Theology (MTh) Program at SU, which was sponsored by the Church of Sweden between 2012 and 2018. This course served as precursor to the founding of the Faculty of Theology's Gender Unit in 2016. The Unit, Claassens' brainchild, seeks to find new avenues for effecting change with regard to perceptions about gender, race, poverty, sexual orientation by means of education and research. She has been involved also in designing and teaching courses on gender in SU such as Gender, Culture and Scripture; Gender in the Bible (Old Testament); Feminist Biblical Interpretation; and Gender and Postcolonial Criticism, among others. The themes of the dozens of Masters and PhD theses she has (co)supervised also confirm the centrality of gender to Claassens' academic endeavor.

## Claassens and the Old Testament Corpuses

Although her interest in other corpuses of the Old Testament is unmistakable,<sup>10</sup> Claassens' love of narratives and, more pointedly, of prophetic literature shines through her publications. Her 2016 monograph, *Claiming Her Dignity*, probes several narratives of female characters such as Rizpah in 2 Sam 21, Abigail in 1 Sam 25, and the two Tamar's in 2 Sam

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in Conversation with *The Light between Oceans*," in *Sexual Reformation: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Human Sexuality* (ed. Nina Muller-Van Velden, Manitzka Kotze, and Nadia Marais. Eugene/OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 89-105.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Her writings on Job, Psalms, Old Testament narratives including of Ruth, Tamar, see Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization", "Praying from the Depths of the Deep", "Laughter and Tears", "Give us a Portion among Our Father's Brothers", "Trauma and Recovery", etc.

13 and Gen 38 from the perspective of female resistance. Similarly, her 2020 monograph unpacks stories of the barren matriarchs (Rachel and Leah) in their struggle to conceive (pp. 47-97), the daughters of Lot who would become the mothers of the Ammonites and Moabites (pp. 25-46), and Dinah who is raped by Shechem (pp. 98-126), all in the context of women and trauma. For Claassens, the stories of these biblical women resonate powerfully with the stories of many contemporary women who in like manner are marginalized, disempowered, or oppressed.

In the Prophets, the books of Isaiah,<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah,<sup>12</sup> and Jonah<sup>13</sup> stand at the center of Claassens' hermeneutical undertakings. But it is important

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. "Expanding our Vocabulary for God: Female Metaphors for God in Deutero-Isaiah," *NGTT* 49/3-4 (2008); "Interrupting God-language: Rethinking the Image of God as Liberator in Isaiah 42," in *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the OTWSA, Pretoria August 2007* (OTS 50, eds. Bob Becking and Dirk Human, Leiden: Brill, 2008), 53-70; "To the Captives Come out and to Those in Darkness Be Free..." Using the Book of Isaiah in (American) Politics?" *Old Testament Essays* 21/3 (2008), 618-634; "Isaiah", in *Theological Commentary of the Bible* (ed. David Peterson and Gail O'Day. Louisville/KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 209-222.

<sup>12</sup> "Calling the Keeners", "Like a Woman in Labor", "The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor", "God and Violence in the Prophets" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets* (ed. Carolyn Sharp. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr, 2016), 334-349; "Jeremiah," in *The Paulist Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Aguilar, R. Clifford, and D. Harrington† et al., New York: Paulist, 2018); "The Hidden Wounds of Structural Violence: Exploring an Intersectional Understanding of Violence in Jeremiah 4-6", Willie Wessels Festschrift, *OTE* 31/3 (2018), 613-629; "Going Home? Exiles, Inciles, and Refugees in the Book of Jeremiah," *HTS* 75/3 (2019)/ Eben Schleffer Festschrift a5149. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5149>; "The Case of the Trafficked Princesses; "Jeremiah: The Traumatized Prophet"; "Prophetic Leadership as Resistance: The Case of Ebed-Melech and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38-39)," in *Transforming Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz; Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (BZAW) series'. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 33-46. "Preaching the Pentateuch: Cultural Trauma and the Rhetorical Function of Jeremiah's Sermons," *Scriptura* 116/2 (2017), 27-37.

<sup>13</sup> "Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah", "Surfing with Jonah", "Entertaining Contradictions: Continuing the Conversation on Irony in the Book of Jonah," in *Between Subversion and Innovation: Irony in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament* (ed. Tobias Häner, Virginia Miller and Carolyn Sharp. Brill, 2023), 246-261; "Finding Words in the Belly of Sheol."

to add that her study of the Prophets is not limited to these three books, as she has written (though less frequently) also on Ezekiel, Nahum,<sup>14</sup> Joel, and Obadiah.<sup>15</sup> Remarkably, most of Claassens' study of prophetic literature is done in relation to trauma hermeneutics. Her analysis of prophetic texts probes ways in which trauma shapes collective identity through narratives of their shared sufferings and how the experiences of contemporary traumatized readers of these texts also produce new interpretations. This line of thinking and way of approaching the text are particularly germane in a context like South Africa with its brutal history of trauma produced by its apartheid past. Thus, Claassens is totally spot on with her relentless excavation of issues of trauma from the biblical text that resonate with contemporary experiences of trauma. Prophetic literature, as "meaning making" texts, then, become for Claassens, tools of making sense of a world-turned-upside-down in which we live today.

Ancient biblical prophets are renowned for their speaking truth to power. It appears in a sense that Claassens attempts to do just that in her exploration of prophetic literature. The themes of resistance, transgression, transformation, female metaphors for God, etcetera, that permeate her scholarship subtly yet pointedly prove her own goal of subverting both the ancient text and the modern context where patriarchy, injustice and oppression hold sway. Her dogged analysis of prophetic texts then serves as a way of expressing her own prophetic voice just as the prophets of old did; but even much more because it goes beyond the prophets to fill the gap of what the ancient prophetesses could not do — express themselves in writing.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Note that Claassens' commentaries on Nahum and on Jonah are forthcoming, respectively in Oxford Bible Commentary series (2025) and in Old Testament Library series (2024).

<sup>15</sup> "Joel and Obadiah," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley. Louisville/KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 309-311 and 319-320; "Transforming God-Language". "Innocent Metaphors? The Ideologies of Patriarchy and Violence in Ezekiel 16 and 23 in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence in South Africa," Co-authored with Marius Gertzen, *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 20/2 (2014), 99-114; "The Ethical Obligation to Disrupt: Facing the Bloody City in Nahum 3:1-7," *OPE* 34/3 (2021), 835-848.

As a prophetic voice in not only the (South) African but also the international context,<sup>16</sup> Claassens aims “to imagine the world to be otherwise,”<sup>17</sup> through her commitment to shine the light in darkness, to uncover wounds and to bind up wounds. Such rationale therefore places her theologizing also in the domain of public theology. Her prophetic voice becomes a public witness in a context of imbalance of power and of multi-layered oppression. It is no surprise therefore that the Gender Unit which she coordinates, operates under the aegis of SU’s Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology. Her growing international presence and recognition are evident also in her research collaborations with various Old Testament scholars of repute such as Irmtraud Fischer, Carolyn Sharp, Musa Dube, Christl Maier, Jacqueline Lapsley, and Steed V. Davidson, among others, confirming her ability to network and cross boundaries especially of gender and race.

### Circle Involvement and Commitment

Shortly after her appointment by SU, Claassens established a chapter of the Circle in Stellenbosch in 2012, and began to network resolutely with other chapters of the Circle in the Western Cape and in South Africa, at large. Bringing the Circle, a society that was founded by a black West African woman, to SU was a bold and radical move on the part of Claassens, given Stellenbosch’s history of racial prejudice and the faculty’s patriarchal and exclusionary precedent. But Claassens was undaunted as she soon rallied women (white, black and any shade in-between) from and outside the theology faculty to constitute the Circle. Prior that time, the Faculty of Theology had shut its gate not only against women but against people of color for almost 150 years. And suddenly, like Woman of Wisdom of Proverbs 1-9 (8:3), Claassens stood at the theological gate to usher women into the Circle. As the Coordinator of the Stellenbosch Chapter of the Circle, she hosted yearly conferences in collaboration with

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<sup>16</sup> “Between Excruciating Pain and the Promise of New Life”, *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible: The Bible and Women*, Vol 1.2, (ed. Irmtraud Fischer and L. Juliana Claassens. Atlanta/GA: SBL), 2021.

<sup>17</sup> “Towards a Feminist Public Theology: On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 13 (2019), 185–202 (188).

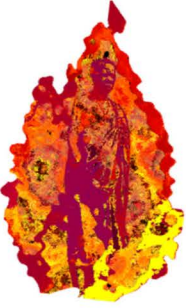
the UWC Chapter. The 2014 Conference on Gender and Human Flourishing, which was followed by the Pan-African celebration of the life and work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye who founded the Circle in 1989, was particularly laudable. As part of SU's centennial celebrations in 2018, Claassens nominated Prof Musa Dube for a Doctor of Theology honoris causa, a move that put the Circle in a positive spotlight.

Claassens is no doubt a prolific writer with a free flowing and reader friendly style and she has brought the full weight of her scholarship into the corridors of the Circle. The first output of the Stellenbosch Circle engagements is *Sacred Selves: Essays on Gender, Popular Culture and Religion* (which she co-edited with Stella Viljoen, Griffel, 2012). Her sheer determination and persistence birthed that volume. After crossing the hurdle of the call for papers, she hosted the authors in her home for several weeks of peer review of the essays over coffee and cake before the draft was submitted for further review and for publication. Each essay was thoroughly reviewed until other co-authors were satisfied with the quality of the content. It was a mentoring strategy as few of the authors were upcoming theologians or first-time authors, and the exercise enabled the group to fulfil one of the goals of the Circle, namely mentoring.

In 2021, Claassens drew from her personal research funds and with the support of the Faculty of Theology sponsored the creation of a website for the Circle. The launch of the Circle website was the climax of a four-day writing retreat organized by the Gender Unit which is headed by Claassens. The aim of the writing retreat was to help some of the younger generation of Circle members from Southern Africa hone their writing skills, and the program, which pulled participants from South Africa, Malawi and Zambia, again, helped to fulfil the Circle's mentoring goal.

## CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, the thread of gender that runs through all her work places Juliana Claassens' scholarship solidly at the center of the Circle's concern. In recognition of her commitment to the Circle and her tireless efforts to uphold its cause, Claassens was given an award by the Circle at its 2019 regional convention in Botswana. Her skillful use of non-traditional and multidimensional approaches easily draws readers to her writings, and her ability to connect with other Circle scholars through her conferences, workshops and seminars as well as her writings no doubt places her at the Circle's theological gate. But it is Claassens ability to cross boundaries, build bridges and speak out against injustice that stands her out among her peers. This woman's works do certainly praise her at the gates!



## 5 | A Critical Reflection of Isabel Mukonyora's Theological Works on the Masowe Concept of Liberation

*Faith Matumbu*

### Abstract

Historically, in 1989, 69 African women gathered at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana. It was a launch of a transformative African female intelligentsia space with a quest to generate a theology that embraces and empowers all genders. Thus, the women from all religions and cultures were invited to enter the space of researching, reading, 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. It is in this regard, that this chapter explores theological works, ideas, and perspectives produced by one of the female theologians namely; Isabel Mukonyora. The chapter demonstrates that Mukonyora's theological works exposes the oppression during the colonial and post-colonial period in Zimbabwe. It further provides the theology of liberation embedded in Mukonyora theological ideas, which is a theology that provides hope for redemption and one that tries to liberate the Shona people from the colonial hegemony and patriarchal thinking.

**Keywords:** Critique, impact, hope, theology of liberation, liberation, masowe, oppression, patriarchal thinking and women

### Introduction

The theme of liberation among the Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is the central theme in Mukonyora's theological work. Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is an African Initiated Church founded by Johane Masowe, whose members wear white garments, and they do not use church buildings for worship, but congregate in open spaces (Mukonyora 2000; Mu-

soni and Gundani 2019). Liberation entails setting someone free. According to Gustavo (1973:9), “...the notion of liberation is more exact and all embracing: it emphasizes that human beings transform themselves by conquering their liberty throughout their existence and their history.” Given the above view, the term liberation in the context of Johane Masowe sect entails setting the Zimbabwean, mainly black people, free from oppression imposed by colonialists.

According to Mukonyora (2020:272):

Masowe Apostles are theologians of liberation whose understanding of God is thus lived, dramatized, and embodied, rather like liberation theologians draw attention to concrete social problems of oppression and climate change. Masowe Apostles draw attention to the serious problems of colonial and postcolonial oppression, industrialization, and urbanization as the historic roots of the ecological destruction of human and other forms of planetary life.

It is therefore critical in this chapter to explore in-depth the theological works or ideas of Isabel Mukonyora in relation to the hermeneutics generated and Christology and missiology/ ecclesiology proposed. The chapter draws on Mukonyora’s theological work whose theology can be grouped as philosophical hermeneutics. The chapter focusses on Mukonyora because she has provided a detailed and systematic examination of human understanding within the Masowe apostles of Zimbabwe. As such, her theological work has been used by scholars such as Musoni, Gundani, Mapuranga and Mapisangana in the academic space to broaden the Masowe concept of liberation.

## **The theological works or ideas**

Mukonyora’s theological work focuses much on liberation or emancipation of the oppressed as situated in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe. Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is an African Initiated Church which belongs to the African Diaspora within. Mukonyora takes a religious dimension of the term diaspora to mean the oppression (suppression) of aspirations for emancipation that are profoundly religious. According to Mukonyora (2006:60):

...the religious interpretation of experience of displacement in colonial and post-colonial Africa expands the term diaspora to encompass the

quest for redemption through journeying and enacting rituals in peripheral places...Diaspora means more than being scattered abroad, it suggests a human condition marked by fragmentation, displacement, marginality and oppression.

Thus, African Diaspora is translated into an African spiritual quest or discourse of redemption. Mukonyora argues that Masowe Apostles imagine themselves in Diaspora. The Western Scholar (2006) notes that Masowe means wilderness, these African Apostles can be seen anywhere in the fringe places by the roadside, behind factories, on the edge of fields, on hilltops, near lakes, on rock surfaces, in grasslands, and underneath trees. The wilderness is a powerful symbol used by Masowe Apostles to express their own marginality, and, the quest for a more peaceful world. Many of its congregants are women, considered central participants in this religious group. According to Mukonyora (1999:65), "Women form an overwhelming majority of Masowe Apostles despite the norm of choosing only men as official leaders."

Masowe Apostles intentionally locate themselves in less visible parts of the physical as well as institutional landscape. For Mukonyora, the question is what experiences of suffering and longing for redemption draw so many women to the sacred wilderness again and again? In response, Mukonyora (2006:59) argues that redemption is the quest in which individual hopes rise above trauma and misfortune. According to Mukonyora (2006:59), Masowe Apostles interpret their marginality and dispersion as exile, which they associate with journeying from place to place seeking out the periphery for worship and practicing rituals focused on a longing for redemption. Thus, Masowe Apostles accommodate those who suffer from oppression and marginality, journeying from place to place within Africa and translate their experience into quest for redemption they dramatize as part of prayer (Mukonyora, 2006:62).

Women's sense of marginality, their experience of rejection by and ejection from home and their hope for healing from wounds that rise from physical and social ailments are central to the rituals the Johane Masowe Apostles group conducts its rituals in the wilderness. Women's quest for emancipation from patriarchal oppression in society drives them to participate in church ritual practices to articulate their sense of social marginality and to enact their centrality to the redeemed worlds as they envision. Women in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe express their sense of social marginality through prayers for healing and redemption.

Mukonyora further explores colonial modernity- where women from rural areas without formal education were seen as backward or immoral. For Mukonyora, women in Masowe Apostles lay their hope in the promise of deliverance. As a result, the experiences of women among Masowe Apostles have inspired a set of religious responses that make women agents of knowledge about the Diaspora within.

In addition, “in Masowe spirituality, women can be said to find marginal places that are transformed into school of deliverance and attractive haven for peace” (Mukonyora, 2006:71). Johanne Masowe called himself Mbonga and accommodated women as special agents of knowledge about God. Mbonga designates a virgin or post-menopausal woman/an elder and ascetic woman or man all of whom are called wives of God in the Mwari cult. For Mukonyora, Masowe symbolizes the experience of marginality but also creates safe place where women can express their anxiety through shaking and tears. Masowe women are often seen selling homemade crafts, vegetables, other small goods they carry to open air markets in different town to earn a living. They are recognized for pioneering the money changing business in Zimbabwe.

## A Critical Reflection

Having noted the above theological ideas, it is therefore critical to establish whether women among the Masowe Apostles have surpassed oppression and gained their liberation. On a positive note, Masowe Apostles still have a lived theology of liberation for *vanhuvatema* (black people) (Mukonyora, 2020:275). Up to the present date, this theology is owned through schism of white robes and outdoor worship in the *masowe* or sacred wilderness. The continued existence of Masowe Apostles might be attributed to the fact that, “girls and women in Africa face unequal chances for education, less inheritance and ownership of assets, discrimination in employment and occupations, violence at home and in public spaces, and limited political representation” (Kevane, 2004:2). Therefore, they remain attached to the theology of hope which is entranced in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe.

There is also a growing percentage of women in Masowe Apostles. Just like what Mukonyora observed, women are considered central participants in this religious group and form an overwhelming majority of Masowe congregants (Musoni, 2020). The impact of this religious group

can be witnessed by African expansion to other African countries (particularly southern, central and eastern regions) and Western countries at large. Musoni (2021) observes that Johane Masowe branches have been established in South Africa. According to Mukonyora (2020:272), victims of oppression who wandered in the wilderness in Exodus – explains the ritual behaviour of Masowe Apostles and migration from Zimbabwe to Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, and beyond.

The positive impact of women among the Masowe Apostles influenced Mai Chaza to found an exclusively Black Zimbabwean Church named *GutaRaJehovha* Church in 1954 which later split into two denominations namely; *GutaRaMwari* and *GutaRaJehovha* (Dube, 2008). Sibanda (2017) notes that, although throughout history, the church leadership has been predominantly male, the tables have been turned. Cases of female leadership, such as Mai Chaza (1914–1960) who founded the GutaraJehovah in 1954, and TespyNyanhete (born in 1992) who became the leader of the MudzimuUnoera Church in Guruve in Zimbabwe reflects that women are independent, liberated and overcome patriarchal dominance. For example, the split of the Johane Masowe Church into various JMC Churches in Zimbabwe (*JohaneMasoweChishanuVadzidzi*; *JohaneMasoweChishanuJerusarema*; *JohaneMasoweChishanuMudzimuUnoera*; *JohaneMasoweChishanu ye kwaJacobo*; *JohaneMasoweChishanu ye Nyenyedzi* and many other branches of this church in Zimbabwe (Musoni, 2022:3-4) is evidence of the growth and positive impact of the Masowe Apostles to the nation.

Socially, the women in Masowe Apostles have managed to gain their liberation as they are able to cater for their family welfare. For example, Masowe women in Zimbabwe are not limited to selling homemade crafts, they are now drivers of the economy in the informal sector with some as runners and others as business entrepreneurs. Mukonyora (2020) points out that women find refuge in Masowe apostles, because the level of education of an individual does not matter and the bible does not have a place in this religion. Given that Masowe apostles are not discriminatory and oppressive as missionary churches, they received an overwhelming welcome from the discriminated and oppressed people within.

The theology of hope portrayed in Masowe Apostles has made it a hub, not for only women, but also for all those suffering either from fever, witchcraft, hunger, natural disasters, unemployment and rejection. For

example, Banda and Dodo (2014:9) established that over 80% of the interviewees and 140 questionnaire respondents indicated that the majority of people (non-members) who frequent *masowe* seek advice and help in securing jobs. During the advent of COVID-19, the majority of the population in Zimbabwe sought spiritual help and guidance from Masowe Apostles. The presence of prophets in Masowe symbolizes the theology of hope as congregants are given hope through prophecy.

On a negative note, despite the efforts made by Isabel Mukanyoro in exploring a theology of hope and liberation among the Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe, women still suffer from the patriarchal thinking that shapes this religion. For example, only male congregants occupy almost all the liturgical spaces in the church (Musoni, 2020). Only men perform duties such as: “being directors of ceremonies; officiating the key theological speeches; laying on of hands for prospective members for conversion; cleaning and preparing the *sowef* or services (before and after church services); and, lastly, lighting the ritual fire during all-night vigils.

Musoni (2020:6) established that, “women’s full participation in the liturgical spaces in most African Initiated Churches is hampered and restricted by taboos surrounding menstruation.” In African Traditional Religion, particularly Shona traditional religions, menstrual blood is considered as particularly polluting (Chitando, 2002). This is so because, in African Traditional Religions, only older women are permitted to brew beer for ancestral veneration (Chitando, 2002, 19). Thus, the non-occupancy of women of this liturgical space within the Masowe apostles could be due to the ideology of ritual purity. Referring to the same concept of women being regarded as ritually unclean, Siwila (2015:90) observes that Africans, like Jews, have taboos associated with menstrual blood. Given the above example, one can argue that this is the kind of scenario that Mukanyoro was concerned with in her theological work. The above example also exemplifies the marginality and disempowerment of women. In order to empower women and emancipate women, Isabel Mukanyoro has focused on the theology of liberation (liberation of women from all forms of oppression).

There are also reported cases of abuses among young girls in these African Initiated Churches. For example, a midwife who is a member of the Johane Masowe Shonhiwa apostolic church told Human Rights Watch that church doctrine requires girls to marry between ages 12 and 16 to prevent sexual relations outside marriage. “As soon as a girl reaches puberty, any man in the church can claim her for his wife,” Country Policy

and Information Note Zimbabwe: Women fearing gender-based harm or violence (2017:20). In Zimbabwe the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act makes it a criminal offense for anyone to promise a girl under 18 in marriage or to force a girl or woman to enter into a marriage against her will. It also makes it a criminal offense to use cultural or customary rites or practices to force a woman to marry. A court ruled that as of January 20 2016 no one in Zimbabwe may enter into any marriage, including customary law unions, before the age of 18 Country Policy and Information Note Zimbabwe: Women fearing gender-based harm or violence (2017:22). Given this, one question remains; Can we say women are liberated in Masowe apostles when young girls are forced into marriage against their will, let alone consent? The above instance calls for absolute liberation of women as advocated by Mukanyora. Given such instances, Mukanyora suggested that the Masowe church should be regarded as an attractive haven for deliverance, emancipation and peace rather than an instrument for oppression.

Despite the noted instances where women in Masowe apostles are still suffering dominance by men, women are not passive recipients of knowledge about God during prayer (Mukonyora, 2020:285). According to Dodo, Banda and Dodo (2014:3), “Women at *masowe* serve as mothers, advisors, and singers; there are also female prophets, dreamers, and visionaries (*vaporofiti*, *varoti*, and *varatidzwi*, respectively).” For Mukonyora (2020), Women sing the verses as a medium of communicating a perception of God inspired by a much more radical quest for liberation for all children of God. As the majority members of the Masowe Apostles, without whom there would be no vibrant wilderness, church. Women and children should be viewed as important agents of knowledge, especially when it comes to rituals at which men are mostly, if not always, outnumbered by women and the children they bring to the wilderness. Masowe ritual activities are not the same without large numbers of women and children, whom were many women, the latter sought liberation from poverty, disease, and general misfortunes that came with oppression in the patriarchal world.

## Sources used

To construct her theological work on Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe, Mukonyora used the following articles and books as sources. These include *Where are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe* by Michael

F C Bourdillion. *Independent Churches Among the Shona*, A Thesis by Isabel G Antonio. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* by Gutiérrez Gustavo. *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches* (1970) by Daneel Martinus. "The dramatization of Life and Death by Johane Masowe." *Zambezia* (1998) by Isabel Mukonyora. *Traders and Wives: Shona women in the History of Zimbabwe* (1992) by Elizabeth Schmidt. "The argument of Images: From Zion to the Wilderness in African churches" by Richard Werbner In *Theoretical Exploration in African Religion*, edited by W van Binsbergen and M. Schoffeleers. *The Korsten Basketmakers: A study of the Masowe Apostles, an indigenous African Religious Movement* (1978) by Clive Dillion-Malone. *The complementarity of male and female imagery in Masowe Theological language*, A Doctoral Thesis by Isabel Mukonyora.

The above sources were used by Mukonyora in constructing her liberation theology. They became the primary sources or basis for her theological work for example, a book by Gustavo enables her to understand the concept of liberation and this enabled her to critically engage on the masowe concept of liberation the meaning of the phrase theology of liberation.

## CONCLUSION

Mukonyora observes that Masowe Apostles continue to turn human suffering into the reason for prayer as a way of expressing their hope. Masowe Apostles provide a hub to those who are oppressed, marginalized, suffering, sick, unemployed even those who face rejection. The main aim is to liberate and provide a theology of redemption to the Zimbabweans and Africans at large. However, the concept of liberation in Masowe attracts scepticism given that women and girls are treated as inferior and at the same time there are reported instances of abuse of underage girls, this defeats the Masowe concept of liberation.

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# SECTION TWO



## 6 | Christina Landman Theologizing with Herstories – The Theology of a Founding Matriarch of “The Circle”

*Lufuluvhi M. Mudimeli*

### Abstract

This chapter sets to unfold the contribution of Christina Landman as a Matriarch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, affectionately known as “The Circle”. The chapter will analyse her theological works and perspectives, as well as her ecclesiastical participation, in the way it impacted on South African faith communities and academic spaces. As a scholar, a church historian, also a systematic theologian, and an ordained minister, Christina Landman has achieved a milestone that has shaped the way scholars are theologizing and how churches do ministry. As the first South African woman to become a professor in theology, she has trodden on the road less travelled and against all odds imprinted a mark in the South African soul and even beyond. This chapter employs the insights of oral history where the focus is not on the interviewer, but rather on the interviewee who does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to guide the directions as thought to be most productive. It also makes use of literature review to capture the richness and ethos of a legend’s sacrificial life which is well lived.

**Keywords:** Christina Landman, Theology, Women, South African, Sankofa, Matriarch

### Introduction

*To the matriarch, the co-founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, a scholar of note, a pastor, and an activist, we salute and say long live the legend!*

This chapter is written against the background of the call for papers under the theme: “Nehanda: women’s Theologies of Liberation in Southern

Africa”, where the intention is to produce a book in which the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians’ theological works and perspectives of the founding matriarchs are analysed. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the life of Christina Landman in three dimensions: firstly, as an academic and theologian; secondly as an ordained minister who in the context of her theology, impacted on the church and communities; and thirdly as a founding matriarch of the Circle.

The chapter has employed qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research methodology process involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell 2009:22). The study also utilized the insights of oral history where the focus is not on the interviewer, but rather on the interviewee who does most of the talking with occasional questions from the interviewer to guide the directions as thought to be most focused on the study objectives<sup>1</sup>. Consent was solicited from the participant through completing a copy of the consent form which was approved by the University of Venda. The study was guided by the following research objectives, namely:

1. To give an overview of Landman’s history and contribution to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
2. To identify the theological sources used by Landman and describe the purpose of Landman’s theology.
3. To evaluate Landman’s theology in relation to patriarchy, colonialism, sexual discrimination, and African male theologians.
4. To profile Landman’s contribution to the world of knowledge and assess her theology in relation to the future.

The chapter unfolds by highlighting the data collection methods and a brief biography of Landman before exploring her theological contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR\\_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf](https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf)

## Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and literature review. A semi-structured interview has been used because of its flexibility in affording the research participant the opportunity to elaborate and develop her responses, and to enable the researcher and the participant to interact in real life situation (Creswell, 2009). A semi-structured interview was conducted with the interviewee Christina Landman through Microsoft Teams where they were recorded and transcribed. The reason for this was that the interview was conducted during the time of COVID-19 when there were restrictions and lockdowns. The focus of the interview was on her life experience, gathering her reflections on her academic and ministerial journey and more focused on the objectives of the research. The interview was conducted on 03 March 2022. Follow-ups on questions were consequently utilized to capture the full richness of the participant's reflections. Data was also collected using literature review where information related to the aim of the research was identified and discussed to serve as significant data for this research. The publications that are included in this study were selected as deemed to be more aligned to the objectives of the study, and those that were not selected were not well focused on this study.

Data were analysed through narrative inquiry. The rationale behind narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk 2007). The duo (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk 2007) describe the pros of narrative inquiry which include the fact that it is relatively easy to get people to tell stories, since most people are pleased to share a story about themselves. Besides gaining in-depth data (thick description) being possible because this often occurs with ease in narrated events, it is also possible to gain in-depth meaning and reflection because participants are content to reveal themselves in stories and to reflect on their accounts at a later date as well. Narrative inquiry further assists the author in identifying the various kinds of narratives as captured from the perspective of the participant. In this regard, the willingness of the participant to share her narratives, assisted in the analysis. The in-depth reflection of the participants' narratives also formed the main argument of this study and assisted in determining the meaning as related to the main objectives of the study. The next section highlights a brief biography of Christina Landman.

## A Brief Overview of Christina Landman

As the first South African-born woman who became a professor of theology at a South African university, it suffices to provide a brief introduction to who Christina Landman is. The biography of Landman is narrated in relation to her educational background, ministry formation and her life's challenging moments.

### *Educational Background*

Christina Landman was born on February 8, 1956, in Pretoria. She obtained five distinctions in her final year at the Lyttelton High School in 1973. She subsequently obtained seven degrees (cum laude) at the University of Pretoria and South Africa. In 1976, she obtained her BA degree, which was the beginning of a great journey into theology. The coming year in 1977, she obtained her BA (Hons) with a specialization in Greek. Christina Landman continued with her studies, and in 1980 she obtained the BD (Script: "Aspects of the exegetical method of Augustine"). She then furthered her studies whereby in 1981 she graduated with her MA (Greek): "The use of non-Christian literary sources in the Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea".

In 1987, six years later from her latest qualification, she obtained her DTH (Church History): The use of Scripture in the *Tractatus de regia potestate et sacerdotali dignitate of Hugo Floriacensis.* With her love of knowledge in the original languages of the Bible, in 1988 she obtained a BA Honours degree again but this time it was in Latin. She proceeded and studied Postgraduate Diploma in Translation in 1990. In 2007, she obtained her second DTH in Pastoral Therapy. In all these achievements, Landman demonstrated a commitment to studying theology from the onset, and this has contributed to the milestones which she achieved in the academia and in ministry. Landman's well-rounded training in theology contributed to making her a scholar of note and the powerful woman she is.

### *Her Ministry Formation*

Landman's calling to church ministry came while she was a teenager. Her calling was not an easy one as the circumstances surrounding a woman's call were not welcomed by society. The (Afrikaans) Reformed churches in South Africa did not allow women to be ordained before the late 1990s. Landman finished her theological studies at the University of

South Africa, which in the 1970s and 1980s was the only university where women could study theology. Landman finished a six-year theological training without the possibility of being ordained as a minister.

About her early calling, she recalled that at that time it meant a calling to become nothing. And, again strangely, it was possible for her to study theology precisely for the fact that girls anyway were not supposed to become something. Her father was a professor at the University of Pretoria, and she studied for free. So, she was free to follow her calling, to become nothing (Landman 2019).

From the beginning of her career, she knew what she was getting herself into and she never looked back. The self-determination she demonstrated, was beyond imagination. It was later in 2006 when the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa licensed her as a minister of the Word. She was ordained in URCSA Dullstroom in Mpumalanga in 2008 in the “township” of Sakhelwe with Zulu and Ndebele-speaking congregants. They were people whose land had been stolen from them by whites in a previous century, leaving them poor, unemployed, alienated from their cultures, prone to HIV infection, and some even half-literate. Here, Landman built a church and established a creche. In 2018, she received and accepted a call to URCSA Karlienpark in Rustenburg in the North-west Province. The congregation consisted of “Brown” people who are Afrikaans and English speaking.

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa played a vital role in what Landman has become in terms of ministry. The development and appreciation she has for the church is summarised in an article she wrote describing her journey with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (Landman 2019:13):

URCSA has empowered Christina Landman to develop from the restricting “Volkmoeder” ideal of a single nation to positions in ministering and leadership where she could move beyond gender. However, although gender for her became an irrelevant category for self-identification, it may not as yet be the case in the church itself, in spite of its ethos of equality between genders. URCSA has enabled her to move from the racial identification of whiteness to racial inclusiveness, while the church at the same time upheld a variety of ethnic expressions in church life and practice. Her journey with URCSA has sensitised her to move from a position of “a woman’s soul is too pure for politics” to become part of the prophetic voice of the church in its relationship with the state.

Landman decided to move away from the academic culture of historical criticism to become part of theologies that were based on grassroots expressions of faith. In URCSA she now leads liturgies in a variety of cultures, wearing a church uniform as identification with congregants. From being a young woman who was not allowed to own property, she persisted until she became a minister who built a church with the men and women of a URCSA congregation. Though for many years she was excluded by the Church Order and Stipulations from becoming a minister of the Word, eventually the Church Order and Stipulations were placed in her hands as Actuarii of the Northern Synod and later the General Synod as its custodian. Landman decided to become a practitioner of the theories she was teaching in class, by that she embodies and defines herself as a theologian who is both contextual and relevant.

### *Life Changing Moments*

In 1991 Landman met with Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Geneva, Switzerland and this changed Landman's life completely. It was from that meeting that she started to be invited to the meetings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. From then on, Landman attended all the Pan African Conferences of the Circle and gave a paper at each meeting, becoming a "founding matriarch" of the Circle, who focused on academic publications in the field of African Women's Theologies (Landman 2019:6). Confirming herself as a matriarch of the Circle, she stated the following: (her own words):

In 1991 I was on a study trip to the Netherlands where the "mission" documents of South Africa are being held. The trip was financed by the University of South Africa I was studying the transfer of Christianity from white missionary women to local black women in South Africa from the 17th to 19th centuries. At that time Mercy Amba Oduyoye was more or less the only black woman theologian whose work was familiar to me. I took the liberty of contacting her at the World Council of Churches where she was the Deputy General Secretary. The only time she could see me was on a specific day during lunch time. I travelled 6 hours one way to see her. This changed my life. She started inviting me to meetings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which was launched in 1989. From then on, I attended all the Pan-African Conferences and gave a paper at each (Interview 2022).

Landman has in her possession all the copies of the Circle publications that were sold during the meetings. She bought copies for the library of the University of South Africa where she was teaching too. Today she is one of the few people with full publications of the Circle. The selflessness and the sacrifices she made of introducing the circle in all her engagements, her knowledge, theology, and contributions to the circle, put her above her peers to the rightful position of being a Matriarch of the Circle.

### *Struggles*

In her theological studies, before 1991, Landman was only exposed to male theology, male black theology and American and European feminist theology. When she became part of the Circle, she never looked back again. She found in the Circle what she calls the cream of African women theologians and their work. In every meeting of the Circle, she will ensure that she buys all the books and even distributes them to the libraries. The Circle contributed much to her that changed her theological trajectory, in her own words, she explained:

For me, the Circle was an eye-opener and a life-changer. In 1990 I became the first woman Professor in Theology at a South African university. In 1991 I met Mercy Amba Oduyoye and joined the Circle. I was then 35 years old – and up till that date I have only been exposed to male theology, fortunately male black theology, as well as American and European feminist theology. At the Circle I met with the cream of African women theologians and their work. Today I am one of the few people with a full set of the publications of the Circle (Interview 2022).

### **Theological Contribution of Christina Landman**

During the second Pan-African conference in 1992, Landman was invited to be one of the participants. Among the eight women who were there, she became one of those who read a paper and contributed to “Groaning in Faith” (Landman 2022). The paper she read was “A land flowing with milk and honey: Reading the Bible with women who are breastfeeding” (Landman 1996:99-111). The paper was based on lectures she gave to women at a theological school in Zambia, where she addressed women who were not allowed to study for the ministry and were kept in a special lecture room to be domesticated into the role of the wife of the minister (Landman 2022). Landman has since from the onset challenged the stereotypes of what was accepted as a norm of being a woman. She taught

theology to women, and she knew they would understand as she has proved it herself that women can be taught theology to understand and not make them rely on asking their husbands at home if they do not understand.

The next meeting of the Circle that Landman participated in was again held in Nairobi, Kenya from 25 to 30 August 1996 titled “Women in the Household of God”. Landman delivered a paper entitled, “The Implementation of Biblical Hermeneutics” (See Landman 1997:83-94). The third Pan-African Conference of the Circle, which is the first of the 21st century was held in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia from 04 to 09 August 2002 and addressed practical theological, HIV and AIDS pandemic and its influence on African women. The theme of the conference was “Sex: Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture, and Social Practices”. It was held from 4 to 9 August 2002 in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and it was attended by 140 women from 25 countries, on invitation only. Papers delivered at this conference were published in 2003 under the title “African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities” (eds Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya). Landman’s contribution deals with “Spiritual Care-giving to Women Affected by HIV/AIDS” (Landman 2003:189-208). The article tells the stories of 20 South African women of whom eleven were Black, six were White, two Brown, and one Indian. Of them, 14 were ‘ongoingly underprivileged’ and six upper-class. What they had in common was, firstly, their HIV status which was bestowed on them mainly through rape and unfaithful husbands, and secondly their need for spiritual care-giving. The article described the road of counselling travelled with these women of faith.

The fourth Pan-African Conference of the Circle took place from 6 to 10 September 2007 at the Yaoundé Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. The theme was “The Girl Child, Women, Religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa”. Landman gave a paper at this conference entitled “A theology for the older, female HIV-infected body.” The paper consisted of the stories of women over the age of 50 who became infected with HIV for a variety of reasons, such as unfaithful husbands, or treating their HIV positive children without protection. From these stories, a theology was deduced to empower women specifically from this age group to understand and overcome what was happening to them (Landman 2008:52-67).

The fifth Pan-African Conference was held in Kempton Park, South Africa from 25 to 28 September 2011 under the theme, “God-talk/Biblical Hermeneutics Amidst Pronounced Patriarchies and Violence Against Women and Children in Southern Africa.” Landman gave a paper at this 2011 conference on, “Negotiating Masculinities in a congregation living with HIV and AIDS”, taking as the research population people living in Sakhelwe in Dullstroom (in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa). This “township” is poverty-stricken with 89% unemployment. Although it is mainly women who are employed – albeit in lowly paid jobs such as domestic workers and waiters – a strong patriarchal culture prevails leaving women vulnerable to HIV infection and domestic violence. Landman’s contribution to social justice and uplifting people’s lives has contributed to the better treatment of women today in South Africa.

Although Landman was an activist against apartheid in South Africa, the rest of Africa became accessible to her as she would often be invited to academic women’s groups in a variety of African countries like Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Ghana and many more. According to Landman, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has indeed done the impossible, the unimaginable as she has brought the women theologians of Africa together. There is this night that she cannot forget, and these are her words:

I remember one night, at the closing of a conference in Ghana, we were all sitting in a circle, and we were asked to sing a song from our country. When it was my turn, I found myself singing a song from the time when I was a young girl – and suddenly all the women of Africa started singing with me, each in her own language. This is an experience I shall never forget (Interview 2022).

Landman through the Circle met with a totally new theology and with a totally new vocabulary for expressing women’s experiences and theorising about their issues. She started reading the Bible with empowered eyes. Theologically her world changed, her eyes, her ears saw and listened differently, and her heart and mind took her on another road. Comparing what the Circle contributed to her theological path with her contribution, her contribution is minimal. Pointing to what she thinks contributed to the Circle, she said, “I can point humbly to two possible things I think made a contribution to the Circle”, in her own words:

Firstly, I gave a paper at every Pan-African Conference, each of which was very contextual and told the stories of women in South Africa. I had access to the stories of South African women as a therapist at a state

hospital and as a pastor in a variety of black and brown congregations. Through ethical clearance these stories were changed so as not to expose the women but nevertheless to tell the stories of their plight. Secondly, I introduced the Circle to all the ecclesiastical and academic bodies of which I was a member in Southern Africa (Interview 2022).

Landman's publications are based on oral history research. Her theological sources include the spiritual experiences of abused women in Thohoyandou in the north of South Africa with Dr LM Mudimeli (see Landman & Mudimeli 2022) or the concepts of God held by men in Zonderwater Correctional Facility just outside Pretoria who are serving life sentences. However, now and then, Landman publishes something on Church Polity. As such she also publishes on women pastors' legal struggle in the church towards equality and acceptance in congregations and positions of leadership.

Furthermore, the theological context of Landman is grounded in her training as a historian of the Early and Medieval Church. It is in this specialization where she obtained an Honours degree in Latin and a master's degree in Greek. Her first doctorate was on the Middle Ages, and especially Church Polity. Her real calling though not regretting her training, as one of South Africa's first woman theologians started when she got a transfer to the Institute for Theological Research at UNISA (University of South Africa) where she was running projects in Oral History research. This enabled her to conduct huge projects on retrieving the silent voices of poor, HIV affected and domestically abused people in all the corners of South Africa as well as in other African countries such as Malawi. She became an Editor-in-Chief of the journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa (*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*), as well as the Editor of the *Oral History of South Africa*. It was in this context that she was able to publish the research of other historians on the neglected voices of the voiceless. Landman has made her mark and still is, she has distinguished her work as a gender activist and a non-conformist who stood her ground being the first South African woman to become a professor in theology, she has trodden on the road less travelled and against all odds imprinted a mark in the South African soul and even beyond. Her contributions through articles and books are read not only in South Africa, but across the globe.

Much of Landman's work at the moment uses the methodologies of (1) narrative inquiry that is based on the subjective relation of equity between

researcher and interviewee(s), and (2) ethno-autobiography in which the story of the researcher focuses on co-journeying with the interviewee(s) (Laubscher Interview 2019). Bentley and Molobi (2019) rightly note that:

Christina Landman's career boasts what most academics can only dream of. Her work includes over 65 academic articles published in accredited peer-reviewed journals, numerous academic and popular monographs, chapters in books and articles in popular publications. She holds a C2 rating with the National Research Foundation, acknowledging that her work is recognised both locally and internationally. Her name is synonymous with theological work done among those who find themselves on the margins of society, providing a voice for those who are either ignored, shunned, or rendered voiceless.

Landman has contributed a wealth of knowledge to both church and academia. The work of this serious, disciplined scholar, dedicated teacher and compassionate minister of the Word provides theologians and pastors to come with a wealth of material for reflection (Van Huffel 2014).

## Themes Identified in Landman's Theology

Landman's theology as captured through narrative analysis which permits the author to collect the participant's stories as lived experiences and tell them through research has revealed the following themes in this study:

1. The main purpose of her theology is to heal people from their pain.
2. The name of her theology is a Theology of Narrative Compassion or a Theology of the Shared Story. Whatever way, it is a Theology that is derived from people's stories and experiences, and not a Theology that prescribes to people what their lives should be like.
3. Her theology confronts patriarchy, colonialism, and sexual discrimination as structural sins, she does that through using experiences/stories of people who suffer from these types of discrimination.
4. Her theology does not have a gender. It invites dialogue between the binaries of male/female, Western/African, etc. It invites everyone to share their pain with their oppressor and to enter dialogue with one another.
5. Her theology's contribution to the world of knowledge and the future is to give people (and to theology as an academic discipline)

words to express their experiences and resistance against destructive systems, and to deconstruct the damaging discourses that negatively affect their lives towards healthy discourses.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, Christina Landman's theological works and her perspectives on the way they impacted South African faith communities and academic spaces have been discussed. The chapter has shown that as a scholar, a church historian, also a systematic theologian, and an ordained minister, Christina Landman has achieved a milestone that has shaped the way scholars are theologizing and how churches do ministry. Her calling as a church minister, her involvement and commitment to social justice, gender, healing, and spiritualities continues to imprint a mark not only on the South African soul, but also around the globe. Her theology and experience place her in the position of being the Matriarch of the Circle.

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## 7 | Through the Eyes of Laughter: Fulata Lusungu Moyo's Theology

*Thandi Soko-de Jong*

*My mission in life is not merely to survive but to thrive  
and to do so with some passion, some compassion,  
some humour, and some style.*

(Maya Angelou)

### Abstract

Fulata Lusungu Moyo is a Malawian systematics and feminist theologian, as well as one of the founding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Her work spans over three decades and has raised great awareness — through storytelling that embodies interpretations and theologies of liberation — against issues that dehumanise women. She is a proponent of religious and cultural hermeneutics that engage with women's experiences, as her work predominantly addresses religious and cultural influences on gender construction and women's sexuality. In addition to her academic contributions, she is also an advocate for gender justice. She is accredited with encouraging churches worldwide to adopt the 'Thursdays in Black' campaign against rape and violence during her tenure as Program Executive for Women in Church and Society at the World Council of Churches (2007 – 2019). Against this background, this chapter — as the title suggests — is about Moyo's theology, particularly her mission to help co-empower others and be a leading voice in discourse on justice, women and the church. My aim is to focus on how her contribution to theology inspires others, particularly young theologians and gender justice advocates. Through theologies of liberation by means of storytelling and humour, I will explore her contribution using the conceptual framework of storytelling. Storytelling is essential in the theological reflections of women of the Circle. Through storytelling, theological reflection proceeds "from the narrating of the story to analysing it to show how the various actors in the story see themselves, how they interact with others, and how they view their own agency in life

as a whole”.<sup>1</sup> This enables theological reflection from the perspective of faith through “a conscious implementation of biblical and cultural hermeneutics”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in terms of methodology, this chapter will focus on exploring the ways Moyo’s has used humour and storytelling to aid in the promotion of gender justice. Ultimately, this chapter forwards Moyo’s unique contribution as a Ngoni-Tumbuka theologian who uses her experiences and knowledge to advocate for liberative theologies of gender justice. Furthermore, I argue that from a theology of liberation, her contributions critically respond to contextual issues of religion, gender and notions of African sexuality. In this way, the discussion below relates to two objectives of the volume that are (a) *discussing the specific features and uniqueness of the theology of a particular Matriarch* and (b) *discussing the purpose of the Matriarch’s generated theological thinking*.

**Keywords:** Fulata L. Moyo; Women’s Theology; Co-empower; Scholar-activist; Activist-theology; Gender, Gender-based Violence; Kyriarchy; Laughter; Ngoni-Tumbuka

## Introduction

Fulata Lusungu Moyo has positioned herself as a critical voice of authority in women’s theology by integrating systematics and feminist theologies with activism and advocacy. Among the various cross-cutting themes found in Moyo’s work is the ability to draw insights from her Ngoni-Tumbuka cultural background (one that I share) in bringing a unique perspective to the topics she takes on. Her way of doing so has been described by those who know her well as theology “through the eyes of laughter.” This is because Moyo, as a scholar-activist, employs humour as a social justice tool. She regularly draws from her heritage, including her Christian spirituality, to face down social-justice adversities affecting her society and challenging them – using humour, storytelling, and other creative methods that will be discussed in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Oduyoye, M. A. 2001. *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In this chapter, I focus my review on the parts of Moyo's work that highlight her unique Ngoni-Tumbuka perspective in order to better understand its contribution to the Circle's quest, especially as one generating a "theology that embraces and empowers all members of the Earth Community." I approach this task as one of the Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians who have been directly impacted and co-empowered<sup>3</sup> by Moyo. I aim to show how her life experiences (as chronicled in her earlier works), as well as her theological approach and praxis, teaching, advocacy, and activism, offer the Circle community insights, reflection, and wisdom that speak to the Circle's general concerns, and more specifically to issues of kyriarchy<sup>4</sup>, (neo)colonialism, violence, and sexuality. After analysing her work from this approach, I then offer a positive argument for the recognition, within the Circle and beyond, of Moyo's key achievement of bringing to life a Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians' liberation perspective.

### Brief Biography of Fulata Lusungu Moyo

Fulata Lusungu Moyo is a humorous storyteller. Besides being a systematic and feminist theologian and part of the generation of the founding mothers of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Fulata calls herself a church her-storyian and feminist ethicist of *ubuntu*, and an

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<sup>3</sup> She uses the term 'co-empower' (compower) so as to emphasise the reality that each person being 'empowered' is not a 'tabula rasa' but has agency from within that the empowering elements activate.

<sup>4</sup> Kyriarchy is a term that was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza from the ancient Greek word for 'lord/master' *κύριος* (*kyrios*). Kyriarchy is a term that extends patriarchy to encompass and connect to other structures of oppression and privilege, such as racism, ableism, homophobia, capitalism, and other social markers, in recognition of the intersectionality of oppression into overlapping, transversing and complicated power dynamics. See Schüssler Fiorenza E. (1992) *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. On the intersectionality of injustice, see Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. "On Intersectionality: Essential Writings." (2017). *Faculty Books*. 255.

<https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/255> and Walker, Alice. (1983). *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

ongoing Franklian Logotherapy<sup>5</sup> student. Her work, study, and academic background as a holder of a PhD in Human Sciences with a focus on gender, religio-culture, and ethics influence her social involvement. Most notably, she founded *Thimlela-STREAM*, “a holistic response to survivors of sex trafficking in northern Malawi that focuses on trauma resilience and healing accompaniment.”<sup>6</sup>

She is also a vice-president of the *Afriaus iLEAC* (Africa Australia Inspire, Lead, Educate and Advocate for Change)<sup>7</sup> and a former World Council of Churches (WCC) staff. As WCC program executive for Women in Church and Society then and later a Just Community of Women and Men (from 2013), she pioneered and facilitated several processes, including those that led to the development of the gender justice principles,<sup>8</sup> the globalization of Thursdays in Black campaign,<sup>9</sup> the annual ecumenical gender advocacy training using peace and security instruments like the UNSCR1325 and the human rights instruments including the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Universal Periodical Review (UPR) that co-empowered people of faith to effectively hold governments accountable in delivering for gender

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<sup>5</sup> Briefly, Viktor Frankl developed Logotherapy to aid clients in transcending trauma and other psychological issues. Frankl developed some of his ideas while surviving Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. See Bushkin Hanan, Roelf van Niekerk and Louise Stroud. “Searching for Meaning in Chaos: Viktor Frankl’s Story.” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 17 No. 3 (2021): 233-242. Doi: 10.5964/ejop.5439.

<sup>6</sup> See *Profiling women Malawi, 2022*, “Gender and Human Rights.” Available online: <https://profilingwomenmw.org/>

<sup>7</sup> AfriAus iLEAC Inc, “About Us.” August 2, 2021. <https://afriausileac.org/about-us/> (Accessed 5 June, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> *World Council Churches, 2022*. “Gender Justice Principles with Code of Conduct.” World Council of Churches. Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/gender-justice-principles-with-code-of-conduct> (Accessed 1 April, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> *World Council of Churches*, no date. “Thursdays in Black.” Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/thursdays-in-black>

justice;<sup>10</sup> and developed the Healing Together<sup>11</sup> for community-based trauma healing.”<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I aim to invite the reader to interact with Fulata Lusungu Moyo (hereafter referred to by her first unique name, Fulata<sup>13</sup>). This hu-

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the World Council of Churches, in collaboration with Kroc Institute, Notre Dame University, and TPO Foundation Sarajevo, brought 30 women from WCC member churches and regional ecumenical organisations for the first ecumenical gender advocacy training that focused on women, peace, and security using the UNSCR1325. From 2015 these trainings became a joint venture of several ecumenical organisations, including the Finn Church Aid–ACT Alliance, the World YWCA, and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Our focus also widened to include human rights instruments like CEDAW and UPR. The aim remained the equipping of those working for gender justice in faith-based civil society organisations so as be able to monitor, review and write civil society reports (often referred to as Shadow reports). Such reports help in the process of cross-examination by the Treaty Bodies and other stakeholders of the reports by the reporting states. *Anglican Communion News Service*, 2015. “WCC Co-rganises Ecumenical Training on Women’s Rights Advocacy.” Available online: <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2015/07/wcc-co-organises-ecumenical-training-on-womens-rights-advocacy.aspx> (accessed 02/08/2022).

<sup>11</sup> Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2019. “Healing Together.” World Council of Churches. Available online: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/healing-together> (Accessed 21 June, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Fulata Lusungu Moyo prefers to be referred to by her first name for two major reasoned arguments: firstly, she will not tire to remind you that her name Fulata is the most significant to her identity as an expression of how she was born: as feet-first breech birth that was also a preemie at 25/26 weeks only; and secondly, while Moyo is the name of one of the patriarchs in her life, Fulata is the only name that is truly hers, and also defines her gifts and vocation among her community. Since she survived the breech and premature birth, her community raised her up to be attentive to dreams and visions as her calling and embrace teaching and healing as her gifts for the welfare of her community. So, to honour this, in this chapter when I am not using her preferred pronouns of she/her, I use “Fulata” instead of the accepted academic formalities of referring to the second name. See the details of her story in Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2017. “‘Ukugqiba inkaba’—Burying the Umbilical Cord: An African Indigenous Ecofeminist Perspective on Incarnation.” In Kim,

mourous storyteller uses both humour and storytelling as her epistemological tools for social justice. Let us set the structure of this chapter as firstly, I locate Fulata as a feminist ethicist of ubuntu and what that means. Then I begin with my story about my first encounter with Fulata. Secondly, I will build on my encounters with Fulata by delving into four sections shaped around her stories. The first section starts with her humour around her own sexuality as a woman widowed at the age of 37 years but never remarried. This section helps us to have a conversation with Fulata about the need to break the silence around human sexuality so as to distinguish human sexuality as a gift from God and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as an aberration of this gift and, therefore, a blasphemy against the Creator of humanity and human sexuality. The second section deals with Fulata's unpacking the story of John 8:1-11 which she refers to as "a story of a woman caught masturbating." This section focuses on why Fulata prefers to read the bible using the contextual bible study methodologies so that the biblical narrative becomes a tool for advocacy as such stories become embodied by stories of women that are vulnerable to gender-based violence. The third section addresses Fulata's embodied activism as a university lecturer that had to wear a very tight hip-star so as to evoke a conversation that led to advocacy for transformative masculinities and femininities regarding the "what" and "why" of women's dressing. And finally, the last section tackles Fulata's dark humour about her widowhood in an attempt to break the silence about suffering to explore ways of meaningful accompaniment towards trauma resilience and healing. The chapter concludes with an overview of her spirituality in light of some of the themes highlighted in her work.

## **Beading Motif: African Women's Expression of Individual and Collective Narratives**

As a theologian, Fulata has been shaped by the research and writings of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as 'The Circle'). She was introduced to it by her mentor Professor Isabel Apawo Phiri in 1989 when she taught her at University of Malawi then Chancellor College. She has since recently renamed her theoretical framing as feminist ethics of *ubuntu* after a long, explorative journey into

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Grace Ji-Sun & Hilda P. Koster (Eds.), *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 179-192.

her isiNgoni beading traditions. Fulata once described building a theory based on beading, a women's practice richly rooted in her isiNgoni<sup>14</sup> ethnic roots.<sup>15</sup> She then described her theory as a beading motif – an African women's expression of their individual and collective *narrative*. The emphasis of such a motif focuses on how the African women tell their stories and narrate their experiences as they bead, using each bead of unique colours. The pattern of beading itself is significantly enabled by strategic threading as an embodiment of the stories told. Both the telling and choice of the bead's color and pattern in each bead finds its place in is inspired by the ambiance, context, and safety of the space in which such beading is taking place.

Her arrival at naming her theoretical framing as a feminist ethics of *ubuntu* was based on her decision to use the communitarian ethos as the pattern that defines who she is as an isiNgoni woman. To this she adds a political preoccupation with a feminist ethical agenda represented by the *beading* motif as a “detergent” that helps remove possible stains of patriarchy in the conception of *ubuntu*.<sup>16</sup> She agrees with Ramathate Dolamo's argument that the notion of *ubuntu* promotes communal relations and interactions between individuals and their respective communities as an expression of their being interconnected and interdependent.<sup>17</sup> Like Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, a Circle member from the isiNdebele context, Fulata argues that she grew up in a context where a person embodies

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<sup>14</sup> Ngoni's are an offshoot of the Zulu kingdom of the nineteenth century. See Soko, Boston, J. “The Vestiges of Ngoni Oral Literature,” *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 7, no. 1 (1996): [https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/AJA10168427\\_10](https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/AJA10168427_10), 59-67. For Moyo's discussion about her heritage, see for example, Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, “‘Traffic Violations’: Hospitality, Foreignness, and Exploitation: A Contextual Biblical Study of Ruth.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 83–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.07> (Accessed 16 July, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, 2022. A Discussion with Fulata L. Moyo, World Council of Churches. [online] [berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu](https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu). Available online: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-fulata-l-moyo-world-council-of-churches> (Accessed 3 July, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> D. Hall, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit, “Feminist ethics of care and Ubuntu”, February 2013, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290952148\\_Feminist\\_ethics\\_of\\_care\\_and\\_Ubuntu](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290952148_Feminist_ethics_of_care_and_Ubuntu), (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Dolamo, Ramathate, “Botho/Ubuntu: The Heart of African Ethics”, *Scriptura* 112 (2013), 1.

*ubuntu* (humanness) when she or he is welcoming to strangers, respectful of the dignity of others, compassionate, empathetic and caring.<sup>18</sup> As such, her bringing in *ubuntu* in her theoretical framing is in order to reiterate that *ubuntu* (in its very essence) should promote equality and justice and enhance the women's stories as an important piece to the fabric of their society. Women have a personhood as moral agents and dignity as *imago Dei*.

Building on all these positive components of being human, Fulata has used the arguments by David Hall, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit in their articulation of "feminist ethics of ubuntu and care."<sup>19</sup> Still, she strongly refuses to add 'and care' because to her, to have 'ubuntu and care,' or/and 'feminist ethics and care' is an unnecessary redundancy and, therefore, very tautological. She argues that the indigenous concept of 'ubuntu' itself, as already defined above, has an embedded implication into relational care ethics. The *ubuntu* declaration that 'my well-being is connected to your well-being' is to acknowledge that we have a relationship of consideration, and, therefore, we care about each other's welfare because each person's welfare in the community impacts the other community members.

Fulata also agrees with Laura D'Olimpio in her "Ethics Explainer: Ethics of care" that ethics of care is actually a *feminist* approach to ethics. Therefore, she makes the same argument against "feminist ethics of care" as equally tautological. Hall, Louw, and Du Toit argue for the need for a 'feminist ethics of *ubuntu* and care' as scientifically and socially necessary within the African context for the establishment of relevance and meaning. So, because of their meaningful attempt to cleanse *ubuntu* and use "feminist ethics" to de-patriarch *ubuntu*, Fulata chooses to use their understanding. This ethics helps to critically address and help to correct what Fulata calls the kyriarchal<sup>20</sup> biases that often privilege the male and

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<sup>18</sup> Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, "Politics of the body, fear and ubuntu: Proposing an African women's theology of disability", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76 no.3 (2020): 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Hall, David, Dirk Louw, and Louise Du Toit, "Feminist ethics of care and Ubuntu." 23 (2013): 29-33. Available online: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ogf/article/view/88907> (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Kyriarchy is a term that Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza coined from the ancient Greek word for 'lord/master' *kyrios*. It is part of the conversation around intersectional feminism (Kimberlé Crenshaw). As a social system, it extends patriarchy to keep all intersecting oppressions in place. It encompasses and

Western supremacist approaches since this ethics emphasises relationship, community and experienced story over individualism and abstract theorizing.

Since Fulata is a strong advocate for the power of storytelling to unleash activism for dignity and justice, I wish to draw on that element of narrative by starting with a story of my own about Fulata to enter into this chapter that is written in her honour and in celebration of her ongoing role as a Circle theologian.

### **Fulata Lusungu Moyo: The Ngoni-Tumbuka Woman I First Met**

As a Malawian, Ngoni-Tumbuka myself, I have the same ethnic background as Fulata Moyo. I first heard of her when I was a teenager and was pondering questions of faith. Seeing the many existential questions I had, a cousin advised me to join a new Bible study in town (Zomba, Malawi). She pointed out to me that it was a unique and novel offering where I would surely find answers. “A *couple* is leading the Bible study. Can you believe it? Both of them together! Not just the husband. I hear the wife is a theologian, and she has guts! They just returned from Sweden!” She was right. This was new to her and I.

We did not know of any women theologians. We thought theology was only for individuals, mostly men, who were preparing for ordination and serving in the church. Fulata’s role as a woman theologian was therefore of interest to me, an opportunity to hear insights from a female perspective at a time in my life when I was pre-occupied with questions about belief/non-belief and the impact of faith on how we express ourselves in

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connects structures of oppression and privilege, such as racism, gender inequality, injustice and binary, language preference, religious hegemony, classism, ableism, homophobia, capitalism, ethnicism, and other social markers that become frontiers of oppression, in recognition of the intersectionality of oppression into overlapping, transversing and complicated power dynamics. See Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth 2013. *Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 7; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 2015. “Intersectional Feminisms Discussion.” Available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROwquxC\\_Gxc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROwquxC_Gxc) (Accessed 19 July, 2022).

society. Fulata set people like me on the theological path with the understanding that theology can be transformative and holistic and that there is a space for Malawian women of all cultural backgrounds.

Both Ngoni and Tumbuka traditions are patriarchal and patrilineal in a society where more ethnic groups are matrilineal and historically accord women high status in religion. For example, the Chewas, Malawi's largest<sup>21</sup> ethnic group, have long recognized the special cultural and spiritual status of *Makewana* (literally translated as "mother of children," but intended to convey, "the mother of all people"<sup>22</sup>). *Makewana* is a title for female priestesses and rainmakers that dates to around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The original *Makewana* (born Mangadzi Banda) was among the most powerful spiritual leaders in central Africa;<sup>23</sup> she "presided over a rain/shrine complex that spread across much of central Malawi" and was "seen as having direct access to God; without her, it was believed that there would be no rain and women would be barren."<sup>24</sup>

Yusuf M. Juwayeyi describes the woman-centred role of the *Makewana* by adding that women in this role were independent (celibate, with a male ritual consort) and assisted in their tasks by a "group of specially selected women of any age who lived a permanently celibate life."<sup>25</sup> In the Ngoni and Tumbuka cultures, there are no such celebrated roles for female spiritual leaders. Given that the mission-initiated Christian tradition in northern Malawi (where the two ethnic groups are found) also initially did not recognize female leadership in the churches, figures like

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<sup>21</sup> Malawi's ethnic composition comprises a "conglomeration of 15 different ethnic groups, with the Maravi complex (Chewa and Mang'anja) as the most dominant group." *Encyclopedia.com*, 2022. "Chewa." Available online: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chewa> (Accessed 19 June, 2022). The Chewa language is also spoken in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Tanzania, in some of these societies Chewa is also known as Nyanja or Chinyanja.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, Benjamin W. 2005. "Makewana the Rainmaker (central Malawi) + Mbiriwiri." In: Taylor, B.R. (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature: 1028-1030*. London: Thoemmes Continuum, 1028.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Rangely, W.H. 1952 in Yusuf M. Juwayeyi, 2020. *Archeaology and Oral Tradition in Malawi: Origins and Early History of the Chewa*. Rochester NY: James Currey, 45.

Fulata have had a major impact on how women from this area are re-claiming their silenced role. Fulata underscores this in the following quote from a letter<sup>26</sup> she wrote from her mother's perspective/based on her mother's recollections:

Being born in the early 1920s and being molded by the cultural expectations of that time makes even writing this letter difficult. Yet, knowing you, my last-born daughter, and your daring to evoke conversation on "taboo" issues, it is better that I write rather than suffer the embarrassment of trying to have a face-to-face conversation with you.

I remember that in 2005, you asked me some culturally difficult questions as part of your research concerning girls' socialization into gender and sexuality roles through the rites of passage. I am still trying to wrap these concepts around my head. After getting over my shock at some of your questions, I realized that if I did not share my experiences with you, then those missing parts of my story would obliterate some crucial pieces of what has shaped me as your mother. So, this letter is my attempt to answer those questions that I avoided at that time.<sup>27</sup>

Against this backdrop of her contribution and positionality, this chapter focuses on Fulata as a Circle theologian that has been consistent and intentional. Storytelling and humour underpin and are a recurring feature in Fulata's theological contribution. Let us, therefore, examine some examples.

## **"Let's Talk about Sex: I have SARS"**

### *Humour*

The use of humour has long been used as a way to protest and interrogate injustices and inequalities. According to Corliss Outley et. al., in the United States, for example, the development of Black culture in bondage "gave rise to humour as a coping mechanism against the oppressive state

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<sup>26</sup> See Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, "Child Marriage, the Untold Story of my Mother and the Church in Africa - A Feminist Ethics of *Ubuntu*," Deanna Ferree Womack & Raimundo Barreto, eds., *Alterity and the Evasion of Justice*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023 (Forthcoming), 125-129.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 125-126.

[Africans] found themselves in.”<sup>28</sup> Humour “became a way to protest their conditions by creating various humorous styles that infused social political commentary on oppression as a sign of defiance, while also providing hope for the hopeless.”<sup>29</sup> Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele describe such uses of humour as part of Black societies’ “oral communication strategies to resist subjugation and oppression by dominant groups.”<sup>30</sup>

Fulata Moyo believes in the life-changing power of humour in social (gender) justice activism.<sup>31</sup> In her essay written in honour of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, entitled “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Justice” (forthcoming), Fulata cites Nancy Goldman to show how humour works in social critique:

Humour is a social corrective...it can validate experience, help us think more flexibly and reframe situations, illuminate the ways in which we live in the world politically, and be used to critique social injustice. Humor can diffuse tensions around controversial topics. [...] Some can use their sense of humor and their body to confront society while making a safe space for people to be open and absorb information.<sup>32</sup>

She adds that for Goldman, social critique conveyed through the medium of humour often has more power to sink into the listeners’ psyche and effect behavioural change “than polished moral essays or stern words of

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<sup>28</sup> Outley, Corliss, Shamaya Bowen & Harrison Pinckney, “Laughing While Black: Resistance, Coping and the Use of Humor as a Pandemic Pastime among Blacks,” *Leisure Sciences* 43, no. 1-2 (2021): 305.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Lu, Jessica H and Catherine Knight Steele, “‘Joy is Resistance’: Cross-platform Resilience and (Re)invention of Black Oral Culture Online.” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019), 823.

<sup>31</sup> Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Social Justice.” Sarojini Nadar, Tinyiko Maluleke, Dietrich Werner, Vicentia Kgabe, Rudolf Hinz eds., *Ecomenical Encounters with Desmond Mpilo Tutu: Visions for Justice, Dignity and Peace*, Oxford: Regnum Books International & Cape Town: UWC Press, 139. <https://www.google.co.il/search?tbm=bks&hl=en&q=Ecumenical+Encounters+with+Desmond+Mpilo+Tutu> (Accessed 25 February, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Goldman, Nancy, 2013. “Comedy and Democracy: The Role of Humor in Social Justice.” A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change. Available online: <https://animatingdemocracy.org/resource/comedy-and-democracy-role-humor-social-justice>. (Accessed 5 July 2022).

rebuke.”<sup>33</sup> Fulata relates an anecdote from a situation where she used humour to spark a conversation that helped others understand her widowhood struggles better. She relates how one morning she responded to friends’ greetings at church with the following humorous response: “I am suffering from SARS.”<sup>34</sup> After which, she would immediately unpack SARS as ‘Severe Absence of Romance and Sex’. She adds that some people, regretting ever having asked her how she was, uttered an embarrassed sigh or a sheepish laugh “while urging their feet to take them away from me at very fast speed. But some would laugh, and in a more relaxed mood, they would engage in a conversation to make sense of my widowhood struggles.”<sup>35</sup> From this illustration, we see how Moyo, in line with Nancy Goldman uses humour as a catalyst for exploring discourses at a deeper level.

Elsewhere in her work, however, she shows that using humour in this way need not always be lighthearted; one can also use “dark” humour. “Dark humour” is understood here as humour that “makes light of subject matter that is generally considered taboo, particularly subjects that are normally considered serious or painful to discuss.”<sup>36</sup> To this end, Moyo argues that:

words of rebuke or moral essays that border on being judgmental or accusatory in approach tend to either create guilt, fear or shame (for the guilty) or a deceptive feeling of perfection (for those with a sense of righteousness). Both do not have an embedded motivation to inspire lasting transformation. Humour, however, whatever form it takes, has the power to strip us naked of all our self-protective layers that lead to the practice of keeping up appearances.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Moyo, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Social Justice.”

<sup>34</sup> One of the times when Fulata used ‘SARS’ in response to the question about her well-being is when she was attending a Council of World Mission-World Council of Churches’ joint meeting in Malaysia in 2006. SARS medically stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and therefore, her audience wondered if she had received medical care, but she humorously used it to stand for Severe Absence of Romance and Sex.

<sup>35</sup> Fulata Lusungu Moyo interviewed by the author, 4 July 2022.

<sup>36</sup> *Wikipedia*, 2022. “Black Comedy.” Available online: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_comedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_comedy) (Accessed 6 July 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Moyo, “Desmond Tutu, Humour and Justice,” Forthcoming.

Thus, in another example of how she humorously applies this approach, in her article entitled “Child Marriage, the Untold Story of My Mother and the Church in Africa - A Feminist Ethics of *Ubuntu*,”<sup>38</sup> she discusses the biblical narrative found in John 8:1-11 - where the woman is accused and exposed while the male perpetrator is protected and made invisible. She states that:

I often wonder what the scribes and Pharisees that brought this woman for Jesus to judge meant when they argued: “Teacher, this woman was caught in *the very act of committing adultery...*” - but they brought *only* the woman and not the lover? Were they referring to adultery or masturbation? If it were masturbation, it would be understandable to argue that she was caught in the *very act*, but if it was adultery then where was, most likely, the man that she was ‘adulterating’ with?<sup>39</sup>

Her use of humour in this way to interrogate this passage works. It disarms the reader and forces us to look more critically at the issue of moral leaders blaming the woman (sexism) while protecting her male lover (*kyriarchy*). In this way she uses humour as a liberative theological tool by employing it to protest and defy sexism and *kyriarchy* and at the same time provide a preferential option for the oppressed (accused woman) in the passage. On a less humorous note, we now turn to her use of story-telling as a method for her theological contribution.

### ***Storytelling***

A scholarly perspective to story-telling is offered by scholars like Brené Brown, who states that “stories are data with a soul” to argue for qualitative research that takes seriously the task of developing “theories based on people’s lived experiences.”<sup>40</sup> Circle Theologian Sarojini Nadar affirms this position in describing ‘narrative knowing’ as a distinctive feature in African feminist epistemology and research values” (in her article

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<sup>38</sup> Moyo, “Child Marriage, the Untold Story of My Mother and the Church in Africa.” Forthcoming.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Brown, Brené. “Research.”, October 30, 2021. <https://brenbrown.com/the-research/#:~:text=Stories%20are%20data%20with%20a,proving%20or%20disproving%20existing%20theories>

entitled “Stories are Data with Soul’: Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology”) <sup>41</sup>

Fulata used storytelling in her personal life as well as in her writing. She shares this in, for example, her parenting workshop book, “Parenting, a Journey of Love.” <sup>42</sup> In the book, she describes her personal use of the medium in the past as follows:

My own three sons have experienced family life with both their parents and also with me, as their lone parent, since their father died in 1999, when they were aged 4, 8 and 13. Solomon was a good, available father, with special responsibility for the disciplining of the children. I was the less available mother. I tried to compensate for my absences from home by emphasising family bonding times around the fire in the evenings, enriched by story-telling. <sup>43</sup>

To demonstrate her affinity to storytelling, Fulata included in the workbook cited above six stories (“Re-Telling the Jairus Story,” <sup>44</sup> “The Singing Fish,” <sup>45</sup> “Nambewe and Namilanzi Talk,” <sup>46</sup> “Linda and her Parents,” <sup>47</sup> “Siyani’s Story,” <sup>48</sup> “Where do Babies Come From?”). <sup>49</sup> The stories were included to aid readers and/or workshop participants to reflect on key themes under discussion; <sup>50</sup> to facilitate engagement through two-way (responsive) exercises; <sup>51</sup> as well as to facilitate deeper discussion.

These aims seem to strengthen the position held by both Brené Brown and Sarojini Nadar that argue for treating stories seriously as part of theory and narrative knowing (the use of the knowledge transmitted through

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<sup>41</sup> Nadar, Sarojini, “Stories are data with Soul” – lessons from black feminist epistemology, *Agenda* 28 no. 1 (2014), 18-28.

DOI:10.1080/10130950.2014.871838

<sup>42</sup> Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2015. “Parenting: A Journey of Love.” *Called to Care*, no. 10. Oxford: Strategies for Hope Trust.

<sup>43</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 48.

<sup>49</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 50.

<sup>50</sup> Moyo, “Parenting”, 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

story-telling that “provide a critique to the limitations of conventional academic ways of knowing.”)<sup>52</sup> Storytelling not only provides a critique of conventional abstract ways of knowing, but it also affirms other pedagogical ways of knowing that focus on relationship and experience. These include the concept of the *Imago Dei*, which affirms that “all persons are created in the image of God and therefore possess inherent human dignity, freedom to commune with others and God and are subsequently capable of knowing themselves.”<sup>53</sup>

Another motif is the preferential option for the poor, excluded, and marginalized. Liberation theologians assert that “God is not a neutral God but a thoroughly biased God who was (*and is still*) always taking the side of the oppressed, of the weak, and of the exploited, of the hungry, homeless and of the scum of society.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, storytelling enables the co-empowerment of the marginalized to challenge oppressive norms, pursue justice, and express themselves, affirming the dignity of all God’s image-bearers and privileging their voices and contributions. Having made these conceptual considerations, we now turn to discern how through these mediums, among others, Fulata’s spirituality is shaped by her theological (methods), cultural and gender position.

## **A Woman Singularly Blamed and Judged for Adultery? Where is the Man?**

Fulata tells of a story of her joint session with her friend Professor Sarojini Nadar at one of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community and Social Activism (PACSA) gender training sessions in 2006 for the PACSA stakeholders, most of whom were male clergy. Nadar and Fulata chose to use the John 8:1-11 story so as to raise these leaders’ awareness around

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<sup>52</sup> Nadar, “Stories are data with Soul”, 18.

<sup>53</sup> See Phiri, Lilly, 2013. “Born This Way” - A Gendered Perspective on the Intersectionality Between Same-sex Orientation and the Imago Dei: A Case Study of Men Who Love Other Men in Lusaka – Zambia.” Master’s thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Maimela, Simon, 1998 (118) in Buffel, Olehile, “Preferential Option for the Poor in the Current Context of Poverty in South Africa: Doing Liberation Theology in the Footsteps of Simon Maimela,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010), 100.

gender injustice regarding leadership, participation, and church discipline. They chose to retell this story in their own words in a conversation between the two of them. When Nadar asked Fulata to start this narrative, to the shock of both Nadar and the participants, Fulata started by saying the following: “One morning, as Jesus was still trying to recover after a previous day’s hot draining encounter with the chief priests and Pharisees, the Sadducees and Pharisees brought to Him a woman that was caught in the very act of masturbating...” This alludes to the discussion above (3.1) where she interrogates readings of John 8:1-11. Thus, after using the Contextual Bible Study Methodology to unpack this story, the following discussion would not have unearthed as much of the examples of gender injustice as this one did. Contextualised within the South African context, the story of the HIV & Aids activist Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo who accused Former President Jacob Zuma of rape<sup>55</sup>, embodied the discussion. It brought out the following critical issues that were later developed into advocacy for gender justice:

- How do abusive men decipher a woman’s body language?
- How is consensus in sexuality achieved and communicated?
- Women’s dressing and the language of sexuality.
- De-socialisation of toxic masculinities and femininities for gender justice.<sup>56</sup>

### **“Swinging My Bottom in Hip-star Jeans”: Women’s Dressing, Masculinities, and Femininities**

Besides humour and storytelling, Fulata encourages spiritual reflection on themes that include: justice, dignity, care, hope, joy, love, and sexuality using imagery. In her years as a faculty member of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College, she drew on the trendy fashion of *hip-star* trousers to provoke

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<sup>55</sup> See Thamm, Marianne, 2016. “‘Khwezi’, the Woman who Accused Jacob Zuma of Rape, Dies.” The Guardian. [online]. Available online: <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/10/khwezi-woman-accused-jacob-zuma-south-african-president-aids-activist-fezekile-ntsukela-kuzwayo> (Accessed 24 August 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Moyo, Fulata Lusungu 2022. Personal correspondence with the author.

among her students a conversation about women's dressing, masculinities, and femininities.<sup>57</sup> She dressed herself in one of these for her third-year theology class after overhearing her theology students arguing on the previous day that "women's provocative dressing is aimed at wooing men for sex".<sup>58</sup> She used her power to influence one culturally and religiously difficult conversation: the misconception that women's dressings and bodies are aimed at attracting men for sex.<sup>59</sup> Dressed in her *hip-star*, she asked the class: "Of all the male students, faculty members, administrators, cooks, and cleaners, who am I inviting by my wearing this hip-star? Would it not be easier and safer for me to just approach that particular Prince Charming that makes my heart skip a beat?"<sup>60</sup> The discussion that followed became part of the public theological engagement that critiqued the objectification (and commodification)<sup>61</sup> of women's and girls' bodies which so often leads to gender-based violence and abuse.<sup>62</sup>

The objectification of women and children by men also harms men by entrenching in perpetrators harmful masculinities that rely on dominance and control; that is, it establishes in them the attributes that dehumanise men by reducing them to their base instincts as if they had no human dignity as *imago Dei*. Meanwhile, women and children are dehumanised through violence, manipulation, and exploitation. From a spiritual perspective, the dehumanisation of women, children, and men through sexual objectification is unjust and therefore sinful as this attacks their dignity as God's image bearers.

Furthermore, from a theological perspective, she explains that gender-based violence is based on a broader misconception of the role of women and girls. The misconception is sustained by interpreting texts such as Ephesians 5: 22-26<sup>63</sup> through the lens of power and domination based on

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> For Fulata Moyo's views on the commodification of women, see, for example, *The Carter Center: Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope*. No date. "Human Rights Defender: Fulata Moyo." [https://www.cartercenter.org/peace/human\\_rights/defenders/defenders/fulata-moyo.html](https://www.cartercenter.org/peace/human_rights/defenders/defenders/fulata-moyo.html)

<sup>62</sup> Moyo, Fulata Lusungu 2022. Personal correspondence with the author.

<sup>63</sup> "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of

an understanding of God as “an imperialist patriarch and enslaver. A god who commanded total submission of wives to husbands, and commanded husbands to love their wives like an enslaver loves his human property.”<sup>64</sup> In contrast to this misconception, her response is the centering of *transformative masculinities and femininities* theologies that advocate for understanding human sexuality as a gift from God based on mutuality that can enrich consenting adults’ lives holistically. As such, her views can be summed up in the following quote taken from her poem entitled, “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” She states that,

*Yes, sexual and gender-based violence is an injustice!  
The seed to HIV, an incubator for AIDS  
It is about the abuse of power, not so much about sex.  
Sex is about mutuality and being-at-one-moment,  
a beautiful gift from God.*<sup>65</sup>

## What Do You Call a Woman Who 24-7 Knows Where Her Husband Is? A Widow

Finally, returning to the theme of widowhood and its impact on Fulata’s spirituality and theology, her view is to call on church communities to acknowledge the impact on widows of the patriarchal norms in societies like the Ngoni-Tumbuka society highlighted above. Fulata tells a story of turning her own struggle by making sense of her early widowhood and turning it to be part of her advocacy for the meaningful accompaniment of those grieving their losses. Many women and men had lost their

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which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word.” (NRSV)

<sup>64</sup> Moyo, Fulata L. “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” In *That All May Live! Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge*, BiAS 30, Era 7, 55.

<sup>65</sup> Moyo, Fulata L. “Called to Lament Injustice and Prophesy Equality, Justice, Peace and Healing for All – Honoring Reverend Dr. Nyambura Njoroge.” In *That All May Live! Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge*, BiAS 30, Era 7, 47.

spouses to death through different causes. She used every possible platform to help accompany others as an important part of her own healing. So, when she was invited to share a word of encouragement by the Zomba Baptist Church in 2000, she started with a joke: “What do you call a woman who 24-7 knows where her husband is?” Different responses came from the congregants, including ‘a stalker; an investigator; a detective...’ With a humorous smile, she answered: “a widow, she knows 24-7 where the remains of her husband are. If she is a Christian, then she also knows where her husband is eternally!” Then she shared about her own struggles as a widow, raising the questions of people with good intentions that instead of spending time to listen to what the bereaved are struggling with, assume that they know what is needed. Therefore, they end up bringing words of encouragement that often lack relevance and present an image of God that is less loving and compassionate – thus hurting the already bereaved member even more.<sup>66</sup> In the article “Widowhood and Desperation for Food: Retelling Ruth in the Context of Human Trafficking!” she highlights this point by stating that:

For many women, especially in the global south, widowhood is not just the death of a spouse but also the degeneration to desperation. The realities of unjust global economic systems deprive the majority while unjustly rewarding the privileged few.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, it is not uncommon among the Ngoni in Malawi to encounter a widow that will mourn at a funeral for both the (a) loss of a beloved husband and (b) the grief at “the utter desperation for survival that this departure entails for her, her children and other dependents.”<sup>68</sup> Her response to this situation (and others like it) is a call for the church and church members to revisit and reflect on the book of Ruth which

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<sup>66</sup> See Moyo, Fulata Lusungu, 2006. “Navigating Experiences of Healing: A Narrative Theology of Eschatological Hope as Healing.” In Isabel Phiri & Sarojini Nadar (Eds.), *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 243-257.

<sup>67</sup> Moyo, Fulata L. 2010. “Widowhood and Desperation for Food: Retelling Ruth in the Context of Human Trafficking!” A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches. [http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/images/women\\_campaign/Bible%2520Study%2520on%2520Ruth%25203.pdf](http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/images/women_campaign/Bible%2520Study%2520on%2520Ruth%25203.pdf) (Accessed 25 February, 2023). <http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources-dov/campaigns/40-days-to-end-violence-against-women.html>; <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>, (Accessed 22 July, 2022).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

addresses widowhood desperation. For instance, the book describes Naomi and Ruth as “two desperate, dispossessed widows who had to glean for food.”<sup>69</sup> And as “sonless widows, they had no means of reclaiming ‘their’ land. They have each other, but without a man, this solidarity is not enough for their survival.” For Ruth and Naomi, their solution befitting their context was Ruth’s marriage to Boaz. Fulata suggests, therefore, that today’s Christian readers can reflect on their contextual realities to address contextual challenges impacting widows with questions like:

- How do we challenge the transformation of social systems that have unjustly subjected widows to desperation where sometimes the commoditization of their bodies for food is the only viable option?
- How can we prophetically challenge socio-economic systems that keep on making widows vulnerable?
- As a community of women and men, how can we ensure that we have kind-hearted and un-abusive Boaz’s that will work for gender and socio-economic justice for all?<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has described and discussed Fulata Lusungu Moyo’s contribution to theology and advocacy of gender justice. Fulata’s role as part of the generation of the founding mothers of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and her contribution as a feminist ethicist of ubuntu has impacted gender justice advocacy for over three decades. She has positioned herself as a critical voice of authority in women’s African theologies by integrating systematics and feminist theologies with activism and advocacy. Her unique perspective weaves together themes and insights from her Christian spirituality and the Ngoni-Tumbuka cultural heritage, both of which inform her use of humour and storytelling as social justice tools. Through describing and analysing her work, this chapter has aimed to offer a positive argument for the recognition, within the Circle and beyond, of Fulata’s key achievement of bringing to life a Ngoni-Tumbuka women theologians’ liberation perspective.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 1-2.

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## 8 | **Getrude Kapuma's Narrative Theology of Pastoral Care:**

A Therapy for Trauma among Widows in Malawi

*Mwawi N. Chilongozi & Mercy Chilapula*

### **Abstract**

Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma is a renowned woman theologian and an ordained minister in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Blantyre Synod in Malawi. She is also a writer who has written several articles. Kapuma's theology can be described as a narrative theology of pastoral care. This chapter narrates the life, writings and theology of Kapuma. It shows that Kapuma was a fearless crusader of women's rights in the Church as she has fought for the ordination of women in the Church and championed the cause of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. She has also contributed to theological education as a Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology at the Zomba Theological University of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi. As a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Kapuma has written on pastoral care of widows as women who are marginalised in most communities in Africa. Kapuma's theology is a narrative theology as she is committed to the theological significance of storytelling and the power of storytelling that brings healing to the traumatised and especially widows. The chapter also demonstrates that through her writing, Kapuma narrates the challenges that widows face from property grabbing to widow cleansing rituals and argues that the church has an important role of pastoral care to the widows as they are denied their human dignity and most of them suffer in silence. The influence of her theology was far reaching as the Blantyre Synod had taken on board the narrative theology of pastoral care for widows while some congregations/churches were creating support networks for widows.

**Keywords:** Theology, pastoral care, therapy, trauma, widows, Malawi, Getrude Kapuma

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on the life of Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma and her work as a woman theologian and as one of the matriarchs of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi. Kapuma played a leading role in the struggle for emancipation and ordination within Blantyre Synod, and fought for women's ordination until it was accepted by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Blantyre Synod. She fought for the recognition of women's gifts, leadership and ordination of women not only in her Synod but in all the Synods of the CCAP church. Kapuma advocates for women empowerment in church and society, women's rights and respect for women's dignity. She has not only done this through activism but also through her writing.

Kapuma's theology is narrative theology of pastoral care (2012:70; 2018:96). In addition to the fight for women's rights and dignity, Kapuma is passionate about pastoral care of widows in the society and church. Most widows go through dehumanising experiences that are perpetuated by cultural beliefs and practices that deny widows their rights. Kapuma, a widow<sup>1</sup> herself understands the trauma that women go through when they lose the husbands in death. Thus, she advocates for pastoral care of widows in the church through storytelling that allows the widow to narrate their stories and experiences. She argues that storytelling helps to bring healing from grief and the trauma that widows go through after death of their husbands. This is similar to what the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and African Women Theologies advocate for – storytelling as a source for theology and that storytelling brings healing (Mwaura 2015:96). Kapuma is one of the longstanding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Although she did not attend the convocation of the Circle in 1989, she has attended all the Circles Conferences since 1996 and has written and published several articles. Currently, she is the Country Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi. She was elected to this position at the 5th Pan-African Conference in Gaborone, Botswana. The chapter proceeds with outlining the methodology and Kapuma's biography before focusing on her contributions to liberative theologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Kapuma's husband died in a road accident in South Africa in 1998 whilst she was studying at University of Fort Hare (Kapuma 2012:62).

## Methodology

This chapter focuses on the life, work, writings and theology of Gertrude Kapuma as one of the matriarchs of the Circle. Therefore, qualitative research methodology is employed. The qualitative methodology approach is employed to analyse Kapuma's narrative theology of pastoral care in order to have an in-depth understanding of her theology. The chapter used document analysis in which data analysed was from secondary sources (Babbie 2010:288; Best 2012:87). In this regard, document analysis was conducted on the articles, newspapers and Kapuma's PhD Thesis. Document analysis approach was chosen because it was hoped to provide insight of the narrative theology of pastoral care. However, this method has limitations as each document that researchers analyse has a specific context and identity that might be selective and sometimes biased (Silva 2012:141). Similarly, authors of documents may leave out some information in accordance to their assumptions (Silva 2012:141). Nonetheless, we have tried to overcome these limitations by analysing a number of documents including those written by Kapuma herself and others.

## Kapuma's Biography

Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma is a Malawian woman theologian and scholar who hails from Blantyre District in Malawi. She was born to Mr. Fallen and Mrs. Iris Sulumba of Tradition Authority Kapeni in Blantyre (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). Her mother comes from Mafa village while her father comes from Kafupa Village both under Tradition Authority Kapeni. She did her primary school at Chigumula Primary School. She did her secondary education in three secondary schools. She started Form 1 at Chichiri Secondary School in Blantyre. When her parents moved from Blantyre to Lilongwe, she transferred from Chichiri to Bwaila Secondary School. She did her Forms 3 and 4 at Stella Maris Secondary School in Blantyre. After finishing her secondary education, she went straight to theological training which was very strange at that time to see a young woman after secondary school to go for theological training. Although women were not allowed to study theology, CCAP Blantyre Synod had opened up for women to study theology with the intention of having women theologians to work within the church but not as ordained ministers. Upon completion of her secondary education, Kapuma was

encouraged to go for theological training because of the opportunity that had opened up. Kapuma studied theology at a time when in Malawi it was unheard of that women could study theology. In 1975, with the support of Rev. Cheleuka of Chigumula Congregation, she was accepted for theological training as the first woman to study theology in the history of Blantyre Synod.

She was enrolled at Kapeni College in 1976 where she studied for one year. When Zomba Theological College (ZTC) (an ecumenical theological college that was training only men for ministry at the time Kapuma enrolled at the College) was opened in 1977, she went to complete her theological studies from 1977 to 1980 and graduated with a licentiate in theology. During her studies at Zomba Theological College, Kapuma faced hardships and she had to endure intimidation. For example, in an interview (11.1.2017), she revealed that she endured insults and intimidating behaviours from male students. In addition, she notes that at Zomba Theological College being the only woman student enrolled to study theology at the college, male students regarded her as an outsider, as their thinking was theology is a discipline for men only (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). As such she was usually segregated and often harassed, just because she is a woman (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). She recalled that this segregation and isolation led her to work hard and to perform very well in class just to prove to the men that women can do better than some of them (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). The treatment she got at college was unbelievable for she considered this as a calling from God. She spent the three years of college life in struggles attempting to prove to the male folk that she was called by God and that she must be treated equally like everybody else. Nevertheless, for Kapuma, this turned out to be a good and positive experience in many ways and she simply had to persevere well, knowing that she was called by God to His service. After graduating with a licentiate in Theology, she was not ordained because she had been trained for a different purpose. In this case, the CCAP Blantyre Synod had drawn up a ten years strategic plan in 1976 whereby one of the items was to train a woman theologian to coordinate the programmes at Chigodi Women's Centre. She therefore became influential in the running of the women's organization and became well known as a pioneer among others who fought for ordination of women in CCAP, Blantyre Synod.

Gertrude Aopesyaga Sulumba was married to Paul Kapuma and they had two children before she was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament. Unfortunately, her husband died before she ordained as a minister.

### **Kapuma's Role in Empowering Women in the Church**

As alluded to earlier on, after graduating from Zomba Theological College, Kapuma was not ordained as a minister. However, she was posted to Chigodi Women's Centre as the Director of women's programs where she worked from 1980 to 1995. As the Director for the Chigodi Women's Centre, she worked tirelessly to ensure that the work of women had an impact in her Synod. To her, working at the Women's Centre was the positive thing she experienced as the refusal to ordination did not alter the fact that she was called by God (Kapuma, interview 11.1.2017). She remained committed to empowering women in the church through teaching the basic knowledge of the Bible and Bible studies. She introduced new programs at the centre and these included Women and Law, Women Empowerment, Human Rights and Child-Survival. Kapuma organized different workshops such as *The Role of women in the Church* to improve the status of women within the Synod. This made a huge difference at the centre because previously the only programs that were offered were Adult Literacy, Bible Studies, Food Security and Health and Nutrition. Furthermore, she helped the Women's Centre to excel financially since at first, the centre heavily relied on overseas grants (Kapuma, interview 11.1.2017). Nonetheless, she was not allowed to perform certain functions because she is a woman. These included doing committal services as well as preparing Holy Communion. This is because tradition and male dominated hierarchy made it difficult for Kapuma to perform well because of some barriers.

Given her ordeals, it is not surprising that Kapuma played a leading role in the struggle for emancipation and ordination within Blantyre Synod. She managed to organize her fellow women to request the Blantyre Synod to consider women's ordination as a priority (Phiri 1996: 70-73). When Blantyre Synod denied their request at the General Administrators' Committee at Chilema in 1995, Kapuma and other women marched to call the church to consider ordination of women as ministers of word and sacrament (Phiri 1996:65). After the march, which is narrated by Prof. Isabel Phiri in her article "*Marching, stoned and Suspended: Christian women in Malawi 1995*" Kapuma and others were suspended from the

church. Because of this incidence, she left the Women's Centre and became a Hospital chaplain at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre and served for 6 months only.

Despite the challenges she faced as a woman theologian, Kapuma was recognized internationally because of her achievements such that she was invited to attend different workshops across Africa. Thus, in 1995 she served as a missionary at Amarillo, Texas for three months where she dwelt much on issues of the role of women. Later in the same year, she was awarded a Dorothy Cadbury Fellowship (because of her commitment in the fight for gender justice in CCAP Blantyre Synod) to go to Selly Oak College in Birmingham to internalize the African perspective of gender and culture there. Whilst in the UK, Kapuma was equipped on the issues of violence against women and how the church could help women become independent. She incessantly fought for women's ordination until it was accepted by the Synod in 2001.

In 1996 she went to University of Fort Hare in South Africa to do further studies (NyaGondwe Fiedler 2017:108). There she did her bachelor's and master's degrees. In South Africa she pioneered the establishment of the Gender and Theology Centre at the University of Fort Hare which was funded by the World Council of Churches (WCC).<sup>2</sup> She also served as a lecturer of Gender and Theology courses up to March 2003. In the same year, she came back to Malawi and continued her work with CCAP Blantyre Synod.

## **Kapuma's Contribution to the CCAP Blantyre Synod**

The history of ordination of women in CCAP Blantyre cannot be narrated without the mention of Rev. Dr Gertrude Kapuma. She was at the centre of the struggle for ordination of women in CCAP Blantyre Synod. Although Kapuma is the pioneer woman theologian in the CCAP Blantyre Synod, she was not the first ordained female minister. Kapuma was ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament in 2003 at a colourful ceremony that took place at St Columba's CCAP in Blantyre. As a minister, Kapuma served at Nthemba, Chilumba and Mulanje Mission Congregations in CCAP Blantyre Synod. At these congregations, she initiated a lot of projects including church structures and building a manse. Later she

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from World Council of Churches by Rev Dr. Silas Chiphangwi to Mercy Chilapula.

was elected as the Presbytery Clerk of Blantyre City Presbytery where she worked as an Administrator mediating between the Presbytery and the congregations. She liaised with the Synod on issues which the congregations wanted to be assisted with. During her tenure of office, she managed to revive the partnership that existed between the Congregations of the Blantyre City Presbytery in Malawi and the Aberdeen Presbytery in Scotland. However, Kapuma was misunderstood by some members of her congregation, her office was blocked and the Synod decided to transfer her to settle the matter.

With all these achievements, people tended to liken her to any other ordinary woman but not as an achiever and a minister. For instance, when she was interviewed on how she perceives the role of women clergy within the Synod, Kapuma (interview, 11.1.2017) responded by saying, "The role of women clergy is very important to the Church only that many people have preconceived ideas on the role of women clergy in the Church." She also added that women clergy are still looked down upon as incapable. Women clergy are less encouraged by the people they work with when they hold some key positions. Instead, they are simply given assistant roles within the Church set up. She further said, "For a woman clergy to be appreciated, she has to work twice as hard as a male clergy to prove to the world that she is capable (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). Kapuma suggests that women ministers lack support as colleagues do not accord them the much needed support. Beyond this, the role of women ministers lack scriptural affirmation that would compel men and women accept them as partners in the service. Relative to this, Kapuma noted that although women ministers and male clergy may have some differences, still they need to support each other. The authors' interviews with Kapuma further indicated that wherever Woman Clergy have served, the people will usually see their achievements because of their hard-working spirit.

In addition to her service in the church as a minister, Kapuma also served a board member of National AIDS Commission (NAC) in Malawi.

## **Kapuma's Contribution to the Ecumenical Movement and Church**

Kapuma has served in different positions both at regional and international ecumenical bodies. At the 7<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the All -Africa

Conference of Churches (AACC) held in 1997 in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Kapuma was elected executive member of the General Committee of AACC and held that position from 1997 to 2003. In 2003 at the 8<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the AACC held in Yaounde, Cameroon, she was also elected as a Vice President for the Southern Africa Region and her tenure of office was 5 years up to the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of AACC held in Maputo, Mozambique in 2008. As the Vice President, she was the overall regional coordinator of the ten Southern Region countries. This helped her to understand fully the significance of the Ecumenical Church, and the challenges and achievements and weaknesses of the church.

Furthermore, whilst she was serving as the Vice President of the AACC, she was elected as honorary president of Religions for Peace in 2005. Founded in 1970, Religions for Peace is an international coalition of representative from world religions based in New York in USA and has the aim of promoting peace among world religions (<https://www.rfp.org>). Kapuma has also served as vice board chairperson of Theological Education by Extension in Malawi (TEEM) and she is currently a member of the Theology Society of Malawi.

Furthermore, currently Kapuma is also the Deputy Secretary General of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) General Assembly. She is the first woman to hold this position since the establishment of CCAP in 1924. The CCAP General Assembly comprises of five Synods namely Blantyre, Nkhoma and Livingstonia Synods in Malawi, Zambia Synod in Zambia and Harare Synod in Zimbabwe.

Kapuma completed her Doctorate degree at the University of Pretoria in 2018 and was currently a senior lecturer at Zomba Theological University (ZTU). As alluded earlier on, Kapuma did her theological training at Zomba Theological College (ZTC) where she is now lecturing before it became a university in 2021. At ZTC, she was elected Dean of Students and she was not accepted as Dean of Students by both male lecturers and students because of her gender (Kapuma interview, 11.1.2017). Male students did not believe that a woman minister could be their lecturer. This is related to the case of Molly Longwe (NyaGondwe Fiedler 2002:195-96) and Isabel Apawo Phiri (Phiri 1996:89-91) whose roles as women lecturers met with fierce resistance from men within the Baptist Theological Seminary and Chancellor College Campuses respectively. However, with time, they were accommodated as part and parcel of the structures.

## Gertrude Kapuma's Narrative Theology

Kapuma's work has influenced and impacted Malawian women and other women theologians in Africa. Her narrative theology is within the African women theologies in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. As a member of the Circle, her theology is contextual as it begins with the experiences of African women and particularly widow. Kapuma has written and published several articles and these include *Gender-based Violence and the Church? Malawian women speak out* (2015), *Widowhood: A story of pain, a need for healing* (2012), *Gender and Access to Land Ownership: The experiences of Malawian Widows and the Absence of the Church* (2019).

In her writings, Kapuma (2012:61) expresses her concern on the way women especially widows are treated in the communities. Kapuma (2012:61) argues that "women are created in the image of God", thus, they should be treated with dignity. Kapuma (2012:61; 2018:14) argues that the church is mandated to care for the underprivileged and marginalised of society. However, the church neglects its role of caring for the less privileged such as widows when they need help during the period of grief. At the same time, most widows are traumatised as they are heavily burdened by cultural beliefs and practices. Kapuma (2012:61) argues that "church leaders have tremendous potential for educating and empowering communities to treat women in general and widows specifically, with respect". Widows suffer psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually and face legal challenges when their husbands die. Kapuma (2018:27-29) notes that some dehumanising experiences that widows go through include "widow cleansing" where a widow has sexual intercourse with one of the relative of her late husband in order to cleanse her and wade off the spirit of death. Apart from widow cleansing, widows wear mourning attire usually black in colour and has to shave her hair as a sign of mourning. They eat from broken plates and sleeps on the mat on the floor not on her bed. Widows live in isolation within their community as they are regarded as unclean. These cultural practices rob a widow of her human dignity and they are perpetuated by cultural beliefs causing widows to suffer psychologically, emotionally and physically. Unfortunately, the custodians of such practices are women. It is these harmful practices that Kapuma is fighting against and that such practices should come to an end.

Kapuma (2018:34-35) further narrates that death of a husband has financial implications for the widow as she faces challenges of property inheritance. Most cultures in Africa believe that the man is the breadwinner and that all the property including land belongs to the man and after his death, the property has to be inherited by his relatives not his wife and children. In some cases, even children are taken away from her.

When men lose their wives they are treated differently. There are no issues of property inheritance or property grabbing. They don't expect them to mourn the way women are asked to mourn for their deceased husbands. Kapuma describes the inequality that exists in terms of the death of a husband and a wife. As an African Woman theologian, Kapuma critiques these patriarchal structures and systems that oppress women because of their gender and disregards their human dignity.

### **Storytelling as a Process of Healing**

Storytelling and narration of women's experiences is crucial in the liberation of women from oppression. This is also expressed by the mother of African women theologies Oduyoye (2001:21):

the stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them makes us vulnerable, but without sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to full humanity. They are events through which we have received the blessings of life from the hand of God.

In this regard, Kapuma as an African woman theologian is concerned with the liberation of women from oppressive cultural practices such as widowhood rites. Widows in most societies in Africa experience dehumanising widowhood rites. Thus, Nyangweso (2017:369) concurs with Kapuma that widowhood experiences differ from one location to the other and from one culture to the other because of diversity of cultures in Africa. However, there are similarities with regards to widowhood rites and practices (Nyangweso 2017:369). One common cultural practice of widowhood rite is sexual cleansing. A widow is forced to have sex with a relative of her deceased husband as a way of wading off evil spirits (Kapuma 2018:261). African women theologies as contextual, communal and narrative theologies regard stories and experiences of women as a

source of its theology. Storytelling in African context is regarded as a medium of communication (Oduyoye 2001:10; Mwaura 2015:98). Thus, Phiri (2004:156) argues that “African women 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, globalisation and sexism”. Equally, African women theologies have been developed to resist patriarchal, dehumanising and oppressive structures. Thus, African women theologies affirm the life-enhancing cultural beliefs and practices while critiquing the life-threatening and oppressive ones. In this regard, Kapuma (2018:64) argues that stories of the underprivileged such as widows need to be heard in the community of faith because in so doing churches can offer a supportive and empathetic environment. Such an environment is crucial for the healing of widows who through grief and trauma because of what they experience when the husband has died.

Theologising in the context of African women theologies, Kapuma advocates for narratives and storytelling as a healing process for widow and liberation from all oppression that they suffer. Sharing of their stories and experiences becomes a first step in the process of healing when given a platform where they can share their stories (Kapuma 2018). The challenge is that widows do not have a platform where they can share their stories not even in the church. Thus, Kapuma advocates for two pastoral care models to help heal widows from the grief and trauma they go through when lose their husbands. Kapuma (2018:274) argues that the church should take a leading role in promoting the two pastoral care models. The first model is to have workshops at Presbytery level where widows could come together and share their experiences and at the same time receive counselling that will assist in their healing process. The second model is to empower and equip older widows through trainings that they will be able to assist widows who have just lost their husbands. This could be done at a congregation level. Kapuma argues that through these practical pastoral care models the church may provide wholeness, healing and liberation to widows and become an instrument of justice for widows and those who are marginalised. Storytelling through the two models is crucial as brings healing.

## CONCLUSION

Kapuma is the first woman theologian in Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod, an ordained minister, a senior lecturer in practical theology in pastoral care and counselling, a church leader and activist for women empowerment. She has played an important role in the struggle for the church to allow women to be ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament. As a woman theologian and scholar, her activism and writings still impacts the rising stars of the Circle in Malawi.

Kapuma's theology is narrative theology of pastoral care. She is particularly concerned with pastoral care and counselling of widows in the church. Knowing the challenges that widows face emotionally, physically and financially Kapuma advocates for pastoral care that will help widows during grieving of the loss of their husbands. Kapuma as an African woman theologian, challenges the harmful cultural practices that disempower widows. As African women theologians' point of departure are stories and experiences of women, similarly Kapuma's theology of narrative of pastoral care begins with stories and experiences of women.

Kapuma's narrative theology of pastoral care as a therapy for the pain that widows experience is part of an ongoing conversation about the oppressive and traumatising experience of widows. It contributes to the call for liberation of widows from all beliefs, practices and rituals that deny widows their human dignity. It encourages widows to share their stories and experiences in order to be healed from trauma. The significance of narrative theology of pastoral care for widow encourages the churches to offer psychosocial support to widows and help the widows to have a social support network within the church. It has opened a ministry of widows in not only Blantyre Synod but other churches as well.

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## 9 | Theologising with Lilian Dube in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora

*Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo*

### Abstract

Hailed as the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Theology Degree from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Lilian Dube is a history maker and undoubtedly one of the leading matriarchs in the academia, championing the cause for gender justice and the emancipation and empowerment of African women. By 2023, she was an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at San Francisco University, United States of America. Dube's academic prowess spans over decades of research in African Theology and Religion, Gender and Sexuality and the devastating gendered HIV and AIDS. A recipient of numerous accolades inclusive of international fellowships and awards, Dube also holds several professional positions within the international arena. Drawing from selected writings, this chapter highlights Dube's quest for sensitive theologies that seek to negate and transform patriarchal bias that predisposes women of their spiritual and leadership capabilities. It brings to the fore, Dube's engagement with African perspectives on gender, healing and spirituality and cultural gerontology as well as highlighting the agency of women as spiritual leaders and change makers in the context of African Independent Churches.

**Keywords:** Lilian Dube, African Theology, Gender Justice, Gender and Sexuality, Patriarchy, African Independent Churches

### Introduction

Hailed as the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Theology Degree from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Lilian Dube is a history maker and undoubtedly one of the leading matriarchs in the academia, championing the cause for gender justice and the emancipation and empowerment of African women. True to the mandate of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the

CIRCLE) and through her academic research and publications, Dube has stood as the voice for the voiceless African women at grassroots level in Zimbabwe and globally. Her works have focused on addressing gender inequalities in both church and society as well as bringing forth African women leaders who have worked tirelessly to break the glass ceiling as they assume prominent leadership positions in both church and society. Using a review of Dube's publications, this chapter interrogates the matriarch's engagement with religio-cultural constructs and their impact on grassroots women. The chapter discusses the matriarch's contribution to the Circle mandate of re-interpreting religions for the empowerment of women. Hence, the chapter begins by profiling Lilian Dube's biography, highlighting her academic and professional achievements. The writer acknowledges Dube as an accomplished author with numerous publications, however, attention is made to selected publications which focus on Dube's recognition and acknowledgement of fellow African women who transcended the boundaries of religio-cultural constraints but rose to become prominent leaders in church and society. The selected writings, *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church (2000)* and *Mai Chaza: An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power (2008)* reflect how Dube seeks to negate the patriarchal bias that predisposes women of their spiritual and leadership capabilities. These selected writings reflect Dube's theological underpinnings, which seek to challenge and transform patriarchal bias and the discrimination of African women leaders in leadership positions. Whilst these two articles engage with various thematic areas inclusive of African spirituality, faith healing, the colonial church legacy in Zimbabwe, spiritual exorcism and the politics and power in *Manyano* movements, I chose to focus on the prominent women featured in the articles, Mrs Agnes Majeche and Mai Chaza. These women rose from the lowest societal levels to the highest leadership positions and they are an embodiment of women's resilience and tenacity in defying socio-cultural and patriarchal contests to attain affluent positions in church and society. Furthermore, the chapter offers a discussion on how the matriarch responds to the Circle mandate and concludes with a glance through the theological underpinning of Dube's work.

## **Biography of Lilian Dube**

At the time of writing this chapter, Lillian Dube was an associate professor and former chair of the Theology and Religious Studies Department at the University of San Francisco, which she joined in 2006. Prior to her appointment at the University of San Francisco, Dube had been teaching, for over a decade, at universities in her home country of Zimbabwe, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. She has taught courses that include Feminist Theology from the Third World, African Theology and Religious Cosmologies, and Theology in the HIV/AIDS Context. In 2009, she developed a month-long Service Learning program in Zambia and became its sole faculty of record for five years (2010-2014). Dube has been a speaker at Harvard and Stanford Universities. She has also served as a visiting associate professor at Columbia University, visiting associate professor at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia, and a visiting lecturer and visiting scholar at Selly Oak College and Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary, respectively. Dube further held the position of Academic Associate Research Fellow with the University of South Africa (UNISA) under the Research Institute for Theology and Religion and Associate Fellow with the Centre for World Catholicism and Inter-cultural Theology (CWCIT). She holds several awards and distinctions, including the Jesuit Foundation Pedagogical Grant, USF and the Dorothy Cadbury Fellowship from Birmingham University.

Dube was also the executive director of the film, *USF in Zambia: HIV/AIDS and Social Justice*. She is the co-author of *African Initiatives in Healing Ministry* as well as the co-editor of *Theology in the Context of Globalization: African Women's Responses*. Dube is an accomplished publisher with numerous journal articles and book chapters. Her research centres on African Theology and Religion, Gender and Sexuality and the gendered pandemic of HIV and AIDS. In addition to her academic prowess, Dube is a recipient of various international fellowships and awards. These include the acclaimed American Association of University Women Fellowship and she now serves on the AAUW Research and Grants Awards Selection Panel. She has also held several professional positions including being the Research Consultant for Luce foundation Research Project and the Regional Contact Person for the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).

Dube made history in 1999 through being the first Black woman to attain a Doctor of Theology degree from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This landmark achievement, attained during an epoch where very few women, and particularly Black women were visible in the academia, is a true reflection of the resilience of a woman determined to transcend the boundaries of patriarchal bias as well as cultural and religious prejudices that bind the African woman to an inferior position in all spheres of life. Labeodan (2016) pointed out that it has been noted that prior to 1980, African theology was largely articulated by male voices. However, beginning from 1980, the absent voice of female theologians arose. Dube also stands among the matriarchs who represented the missing but pertinent voice of female Black theologians who brought authenticity and relevance to the majority of voiceless women in church and society. Within the Zimbabwean context, Dube is a revered matriarch who is among the founding members of the Zimbabwean Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She stood at the helm of the Circle Zimbabwean Chapter during its formative years between 1998 and 2002.

### **Dube and African Women Leadership in African Independent Churches (AICs)**

Within the context of Zimbabwe, African Independent churches have been lauded for fostering a conducive environment for the active participation of women (Mapuranga 2013) as prominent figures such as founders and prophetesses (Chitando 2004). As such, the AIC are commended for enhancing gender relations by permitting women to assume influential leadership positions. Dube's numerous publications include engagement with African spirituality; genital modification and expressions of troubling masculinities, and African healing initiatives. Her publications have also extensively engaged with the HIV and AIDS pandemic and have focused on the interface between HIV and AIDS and migration, a reflection on Catholic sex taboos and HIV and AIDS, and the articulation of a 'Theology of HIV and AIDS'. This is not by far exhaustive of Dube's publications.

## **Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Faith Church (2000)**

In this particular publication, Dube (2000) pays attention to women's Christian spirituality. She fittingly makes reference to the Jesus Movement and its representation of women hence bringing to the fore how Jesus engaged and challenged the prevailing patriarchal order that relegated women to the periphery in both the religious and social sphere. The early Christian movement and the spiritual solidarity with women initiated by Jesus resulted in women attaining influential public positions within the realm of the church. In this writing, Dube (2000) sought to highlight the agency of women who she describes as not mere followers, manipulated and restricted in their religious ethics by the authoritative voice of the clerics, but were leaders and change-makers. Making use of scripture to show the agency of women, Dube (2000) makes reference to Nympha of Laodicea (Colossians 4:15) and Prisca (2 Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:5). These two women are clear examples of women who transcended over patriarchal barriers and assumed leadership roles.

Similarly, Dube (2000) draws attention to the position of African women in the church. Centring on the African Independent Church (AIC), Dube (2000) advances that the theology of this denomination reverses the status of women in the church. Without romanticising the AICS and how some women are marginalised, recognition is given to those women with spiritual gifts, and as such, these women are accorded respect as well as a safe space to exercise their spiritual gifts. A parallel juxtaposition is paid to women in AICs with those practising traditional spirituality, and their role as mediums, healers and midwives is duly honoured. Dube (2000) further asserts that despite the fact that the majority of women under the AIC do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of the church, those who are gifted with prophecy command considerable influence within the church.

Hence, in *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church* (2000), Dube pays attention to women's Christian spirituality. She makes allusion to the Jesus Movement and its representation of women, and in particular, Dube (2000) reflects how the movement challenged the prevailing patriarchal order that disparaged women and pushed them to the periphery. Nevertheless, the early Christian movement informed by the spiritual solidarity of women activated by Jesus resulted in women attaining public positions within the context of the church. Dube draws from the Jesus Movement and its response to the status of

women as a reflection on how the contemporary church can equally accord women a safe space to actively participate and assume leadership positions in both church and society.

The article, *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church*, also profiles the leadership role of Agnes Majecha, the principal leader of the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church (ZAFC). This profiled phenomenal woman is the Archbishop's wife who presided over the church's healing centre at the denomination's headquarters and actively engaged in healing, exorcism and spiritual counselling. According to Dube (2000), Majecha's healing powers traversed over many boundaries hence commanding a considerable number of clientele within and outside Zimbabwe. Dube's profiling of Majecha reflects how she stands as a liberated woman in church and society. It stands true to the Circle's mandate of making the African woman visible and according her due recognition and dignity (Ayanga 2016).

In *Mission and deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church*, Mrs Agnes Majecha is profiled as a Christian spiritualist endowed with the gift of exorcising *zvikwambo* (goblins), *ngozi* (avenging spirits) and *kuhaka* (invocation of the spirits of the living and the dead) (Dube 2008). As a faith healer, Mrs Majecha attended to her clientele's challenges related to physical healing, infertility and marital challenges (Dube 2008). She catered for patients from within Zimbabwe and regionally from South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and Malawi. The consultation services sought by her patients were equated with those sought from a biomedical doctor. Majecha's diagnosis was followed by appropriate therapy (Dube 2008). Even though Majecha is profiled as a Christian prophetess, she consequently espoused traditional tenets which were enshrined in her healing ministry therefore representing enculturated Christianity. According to Dube (2008), Majecha's story exemplifies the inimitable contribution of African women to church growth and development. It also stands for the fulfilment and liberating representations of the Jesus Movement where women were also accorded a safe space to enact their ministerial gifts. In her own words, Dube articulates that "Agnes Majecha's case rekindles the spirit of the women saints, prophetesses and mystics of the late middle ages" and "it also defies the discouraging pronouncements made on the subservience of women in the church, particularly as far as leadership and power are concerned" (2008:310). Hence Dube's profiling of Agnes Majecha personifies the aptitude of African women in breaking the glass ceiling in terms of religious power and leadership.

## Mai Chaza:

### An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power

In this writing, Dube explores Mai Chaza's therapeutic praxis in order to illustrate "gender dynamics of healing as trajectories of power at a time when gender balances mean hope for surviving in the HIV/AIDS battered androcentric societies in Africa and beyond" (2000:2). The article forecasts Mai Chaza's social and spiritual journey, it tracks her transition from a mere wife, mother, and uniformed member of the mother's union, commonly referred to as *Ruwadzano* or *Manyano*, of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe, to a faith healer and founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church, one of the largest African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe. In describing the tenacious persona of Mai Chaza as a role model, Dube positions her as representing those women who are:

Not content merely to sit at their husband's feet reading the Bible, nor to stand behind the priests as servers, catechists or teachers telling their rosaries, nor to act merely as leaders and organisers in the *Ruwadzanos* or *Manyanos*, the women's unions, through the Holy Spirit, like eagles, these women soar to social and religious heights (2008:1).

These women refute being assigned secondary roles such as ordinary actors and organisers in the *Ruwadzano*/mother's union to more prominent roles including the pastoral, healing and exorcism (Dube 2008). As such, Dube profiles Mai Chaza as a healer and a prominent woman who transcended the socio-cultural hierarchy that side-lines women. Mai Chaza defied the imposed status of 'perpetual minor' and rose to become an elder who commanded a position of power and prestige. Her prestige rose in the very community that had previously disparaged her as an ordinary wife and mother. Dube (2008) profiles Mai Chaza, who was a divorced mother of sons, but rose to become a prominent prophetess. Whilst divorced women are often shunned in many African communities, Mai Chaza is an embodiment of Christian women who negated the classification of second-class citizenry assigned to African women and peripheral to Christian development in Southern Africa (Dube 2008).

As a renowned healer, Dube (2008) further posits that Mai Chaza's healing ministry centred on women unable to have children is taken as a reflection of African perceptions of gender, healing and cultural gerontology. Dube describes that "Mai Chaza's spirituality sheds lights on the suffering, silence and resistance of many African women struggling with the question of the church's mission in Africa today" (2008:2).

## Responding to the Circle Mandate

Dube's profiling of women leaders as reflected in her selected writings allows for the exploration of what it entails to be an African, a woman and a Christian. Her writings seek to retrieve the obscured stories of women in the African church history. It also explores these women's influence on issues of gender in contemporary Africa. True to the mandate of the Circle, Dube's writings are a deep reflection of the concerns for the status of African women in church and society. Dube's writings mirror a concern for the re-interpretation of oppressive African culture that subjugates women. This matriarch demonstrates concern for the voiceless women of Africa and hence her quest to make the position of the African woman to be visible in church and society thereby according her rightful recognition and dignity. Njoroge (1997) expounds on the ramifications of what it entails to be concerned. She thus explains that:

By calling ourselves 'concerned', we are stating that we care deeply about the erosion and destruction of human dignity and life, all life, in Africa. We are concerned that much needs to be done in the areas of religion and culture to address the social evils that block the experience of abundant life for people and the environment. We are concerned that for too long women have been silenced and as a result many have suffered and others died because nothing was done. We are concerned that unless we name the sin of sexism and work for its elimination, our Africa religion institutions will continue and we care, we want to join with those who struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation in our continent (Njoroge 1997:79).

Therefore, being concerned entails raising a voice against the injustices instituted against the African woman. Through research and documentation, prominent women are showcased by Dube. This showcasing of women who defied all odds and rose to leadership positions in church and society is a call to women in oppressive circumstances that socio-cultural, patriarchal and other restrictive boundaries can be broken. Such engagement also fulfils the Circle objectives, part of which was expounded by Kanyoro (1997:11) as follows:

The main objective of the Circle is to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent. Research and writing for publication is our target and sole reason for being. Thus, we are an academic group. We want to fill a gap in African women's profile as well as in theological writings from Africa.

Kanyoro's description of the Circle mandate was also pronounced by Togarasei (2016:2) who pointed out that the main objective of the Circle was/is to "bring the educated women in church leadership and in the academy to research and write on the experiences of women so that the story of women could be told by women themselves". Dube's writings reflect this mandate as, through her writings, she has been able to share the lived experiences of women leaders within the church and society, outlining the strides and setbacks these women encountered in their quest for due recognition in their leadership roles.

## **A Glance through the Theological Underpinning of Dube's Work**

Dube draws from biblical scripture as theological resources for highlighting the tenacity of African women in challenging unjust and patriarchal contexts that continually draw women to the periphery. Examples of women who assumed leadership roles in the Bible are used by Dube as examples of female agency that defies the religious and culturally assigned roles of female subservience. Dube makes reference to prominent female leaders in biblical texts. These include Nymph of Laodicea (Colossians 4:15) who led a house church in a highly patriarchal context where women were expected to be under male guidance and leadership. Dube also quoted Prisca, (2 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5) who together with her husband, also led a house church. These two women are just but a few examples of women who gained public positions, status and recognition in the church. In Dube's context and drawing from her selected writings, these biblical women are exemplified by Mrs Agnes Majecha and Mai Chaza, the prominent women who because church leaders, and founders and renounced prophetesses.

The Matriarch, Dube, also pays attention to biblical scriptures that reflect Jesus' contact with women in public, a trait that was regarded as culturally taboo. Dube refers to Mark 5:21-43 where Jesus raised Jairus' daughter. Jesus' failure to rebuke the haemorrhaging woman who touched him is a radical stance displayed by both this tenacious woman and by Jesus. Whilst a haemorrhaging woman was considered culturally and socially unclean, she was not expected to appear in public. However, the resilience and determination of this woman to seek healing from the Messiah prompted her to defy set boundaries. Not only did she appear in public with her condition, but she did the unthinkable, touching the hem of the

garment of a man! Such tenacity! Her quest and longing for healing far outweighed the religious and cultural taboos that relegated her to the private domain. Dube (2000) also makes reference to women disciples who stood by Jesus during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. These women were also the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 23:50; Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1-10). This reference therefore represents the agency and tenacity of women who aptly refused to be mere spectators but active participants in ministry.

Drawing from the context of Zimbabwe, noticeable and pervasive gendered differences in church leadership are widespread. In Zimbabwe and elsewhere, church leadership is a highly contested terrain that is dominated by patriarchy. Hence it has been duly noted that despite women commanding a large populace in terms of membership in most religious contexts, leadership roles are commonly the domain of the males. This is augmented by prevalent dominant religious discourses in relation to the status of women in leadership positions. Within the Christian settings, the prevalent theological discourse centres on the headship of the males over all females. Ayanga (2016) also lamented the muted voice of women in decision making and leadership positions, a situation she ascribes to lack of training opportunities essential for equipping women with required knowledge and skills. Resultantly, Ayanga (2016) further posits that women end up filling the pews whilst men occupy the revered positions at the pulpit. As such, it has been observed that within the context of the church, women have, and continue to be recipients of theology instead of being creators of a theology that is informed by their own lived experiences (Ayanga 2016). The two women profiled by Dube, Mrs Majecha and Mai Chaza are an embodiment of the capabilities of African women to transcend beyond the religio-cultural delineations that subdue women. Dube's profiling of these women is an unabated indication that women can rise above socio-cultural inhibition and can also claim a position on the pulpit as well as serving in influential leadership positions similar to their male counterparts.

Furthermore, scholars writing from the context of Zimbabwe have attested to the subjugated role of women within church leadership (Chitando 2004; Kwaramba 2018; Mapuranga 2013). This subjugation of women is evidenced by their exclusion from leadership positions but instead, women are accorded ceremonial titles to masquerade their lack of leadership visibility.

Dube focuses on women from the African Independent Churches in the context of Zimbabwe. She profiles ordinary women who defied the cultural and religious biases and rose to conspicuous leadership positions within the church and society. While Dube's writings represent the voice of the voiceless through profiling the leadership roles assumed by the characters in her narratives, these profiled women leaders equally represent the voice of the majority of women struggling to break the glass ceiling within the realm of leadership in church and society. Profiling these women leaders is a reflection of the agency of the African woman and her ability to transcend the boundaries of patriarchal trajectories that otherwise relegate women to the periphery of leadership.

Dube's writings are therefore a lament, a cry for sensitive theologies that seek to negate and transform socio-cultural and patriarchal bias that denies women their spiritual and leadership capabilities. In recognition of Dube's work, I propose a new theology, one based on tenacity. A theology of tenacity, drawn from the biblical text from 2Kings 4: 8-37, reflects the tenacity of women in responding to challenging situations. Such tenacity of women is brought forth in the characters profiled by Dube, Mrs Majecha in *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Faith Church* (2000) and Mai Chaza in *Mai Chaza: An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power* (2008). While Mai Chaza was a divorcee, culturally shunned within the African context, she rose and became a prominent healer, a prophetess and the founder of a church. The very society that had previously shunned and denigrated her, was the same society that changed and accorded her respect and restored her dignity. Through her healing ministry, Mai Chaza gained respect and prominence from near and afar. The tenacity shown by the characters raised by Dube symbolizes a re-interpretation of an oppressive African culture, it embodies the liberation of African women from the shackles of oppressive religious and cultural norms marginalizing them from the purview of leadership. Additionally, Dube's profiling of these tenacious women unravels the interplay of gender, religion and culture and how these influence the status of women in church and society. Dube's engagement with the AICs reflects how they have cultivated a fertile ground for the active participation and inclusion of women in leadership positions. Hence women are accorded status and honoured as they partake several leadership roles inclusive of prophetesses, priestesses, choristers, healers and 'itinerant preachers' (Chitando 2004:123). As such, Dube's writings reflect that the AICs have improved gender relations by creating space for female leadership.

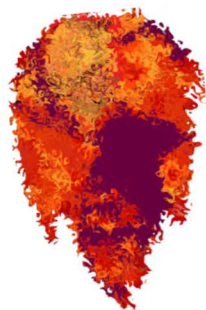
## CONCLUSION

Whilst considerable strides have been made, the status of women in church and society remains highly contested. Literally, in most major religions, women still constitute the majority of members but the influential leadership positions are still monopolised by men. Sadly, Mapuranga (2013) rightfully noted that women are still abstract leaders and more visible as clients within most religious contexts. Socio-cultural, historical, economic and theological reinforcements continue to account for this biased anomaly. Through her selected writings discussed in this chapter, Dube seeks for a biblical hermeneutic that is liberative, one that accords women their rightful dignity and status in religious leadership. Therefore, this chapter sought to reflect how Dube, one of the Circle matriarchs and a founding member of the Zimbabwean chapter, contributes to the Circle mandate and the emancipation and liberative endeavour of all African women. In conclusion, the history of the Circle matriarchs would be incomplete without the invaluable contribution made by Lilian Dube, one of the African women theologians who, through her research and publications, has made significant contribution to the growth of the Christian faith on the African continent.

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## 10 | **Doing Theologies of Survival with Beverly Haddad**

*Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse*

### **Abstract**

Beverly Haddad is a blend of three worlds. She is a woman, a priest and an intellectual-activist for women's rights and dignity. Her contribution to the theological and developmental discourse opposing the oppression and marginalization of African women is unquestionable. She was amongst the pioneers of women ordination in the Anglican Church, thus helping in the claiming of the right and place of women in the priesthood. Then she spent years as an academic, teaching and researching in the area of women, church and development, with the aim of discovering the role of the church and theology in the empowerment of marginalized women both in the church and in society. Her work focused on what Sandra Pertek (2022:201) calls "capturing the strength of survivors in coping with severity of exploitation." These being African women. This article is an appraisal of Haddad's contribution to the development of an appreciation of theology as a tool of building resilience in women's groups so as to transform them from victims of oppression to agents of freedom and liberation. It will demonstrate that Haddad's theology is interwoven with her developmental and ecclesiastical struggles, which emanate from the experiences of other African women with whom she is in solidarity.

**Keywords:** Survival, theology, resilience, priesthood, Beverly Haddad, Manyanos

### **Introduction**

I first met Beverly Haddad at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg Campus, in 2009. Before that I did not know anything about her or her work. I had just joined UKZN to pursue my doctoral studies in Biblical Studies. I was attracted to her because of the work she had done with grassroots women in Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg, whose voices had never been heard. That was because my PhD required

that I develop a Pentecostal feminist hermeneutic using grassroots women whose voices remained on the margins of society. There was a paucity of published work in this area. I then gravitated towards the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method of reading the Bible with women which Haddad had already been doing for a number of years. I found her work helpful because it recognizes that women have resources of resilience, drawn from the Bible and their faith. Since then, I have remained appreciative of her work and regarded her as my dialogue partner in grassroots-based feminist hermeneutics.

It is common and documented knowledge that almost everywhere in the world, women are victims of multiple challenges ranging from the social, economic to the political. The church has been complicit to the oppression of women. Haddad noted that:

For centuries the patriarchy of the church has provided the almost solely male leadership with a measure of power that enables abuse, or at least collusion in abuse of women to continue unabated (2003:155).

This situation is even worse for African women who have always been victims of cultural and religious practices that relegate them to the margins. Influenced by patriarchy, religious teachings, and cultural perceptions on gender division of labour have contributed to women's economic disempowerment and dependence on men (Paulo 2010:43). Haddad's work argues that these practices and perceptions should diminish, as they no longer suit the changing situation in Africa where violence against women is pervasive (Haddad 1998:15). Gender-based violence is all-pervasive in South Africa as thousands of women are subjected to violence in their homes, workplaces and communities. This violence threatens their lives and the lives of their children (Haddad 2002). However, Haddad's work, unlike that of other theologians, does not end there. It goes on to suggest that women have remained resilient in the face of all forms of oppression as they have used their faith and church groups as resources from where they draw strength to face their experiences of marginalisation.

Beverly Haddad is one of the first women to be ordained in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. She was not just a passive beneficiary of the church's decision to ordain women, but she was in the trenches, fighting the church to ordain women. Although the church had ultimately approved the ordination of women, Haddad continued to build her academic career by focusing on the plight of marginalized women in the

church. This makes it imperative for us to reflect on her contribution in the liberation of women through this essay. Her journey in both the academy and priesthood is informed by her conviction that like men, women are created in the image of God and are endowed with the abilities to lead the church and society at all levels. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to explore Haddad's contribution to the development of women's theology of resistance and resilience. The following questions will guide the essay: who is Beverly Haddad? What is her approach to the teaching and practice of theology as an activist-intellectual? How has she sought to use theology in the quest to contribute to the liberation of grassroots women? What has been her contribution to the fight against the HIV&AIDS pandemic?

## **Methodology**

Two methods of data collection form the methodology that was employed in this study. These are archival research and oral research through informal interviews. Informal interviews were conducted with former students and colleagues of Haddad. This was after I had intensively read her works and engaged with those who also read it and appreciate her work. The research is validated by the fact that most of the information that was collected from her and the interviewees was corroborated by archives both from the church and secular institutions. Most of the information that was received by it from the interviewees was "compared with and verified with each aspect mentioned in this paper" (Matsaung & Selokane 2002:44).

## **Gender, Development and the Church**

One of the defining moments in Haddad's career as a priest and activist intellectual was when she moved to Pietermaritzburg and worked as an assistant priest in at an Anglican Parish in Vulindlela for 4 years (1996-1999). It was during this time that she had access to rural semi-literate women who formed 90% of the congregation. It was whilst working in this context that she began to reflect on her ministry from a "gendered lens" (2005:428). Haddad defined gender as "socially constructed and culturally defined differences between men and women, which are usually identified through a set of role expectations of men and women (2005:429). Whilst working there, Haddad observed the complex ways in

which women's wellbeing is affected by a variety of problems both as individuals and as members of communities. She observed that:

What soon became apparent to me, was that social and economic problems touched women in a particular way, in ways that were all too often linked to stereotyped images of their roles as wives and mothers subordinated within family system (Haddad 2003:428).

As a result of this observation, Haddad argued that development must consider the specific experiences of women; it must be gendered. Reflecting on her experiences of working with women in the community of Sweetwater's, whilst doing her research she observed that:

These four years entrenched my conviction that we cannot talk about the effective mission in the church in a context of enormous development needs without doing so from a "gendered" perspective. For too long the church has been slow to acknowledge its complicity in supporting the patriarchal status quo of society within all cultures and traditions and, in so doing, has failed a large sector of its membership (Haddad 2003:428).

Haddad (2001:16) went further to observe that poor and marginalised women have theological resources they utilize for their survival within their context of poverty. These are found within the context of religious women's networks. She argues that these networks constitute an important source of survival and are where poor and marginalised women take control of their lives.

One of Haddad's outstanding contributions to the field of feminist theology is that she focused her work on promoting the voices and experiences of "ordinary" marginalised women. These are women from the church and those from the margins of society. Whilst mainstream feminist scholarship concentrates on affluent academic women, Haddad supplements this work by listening to the voices of non-academic women to underline their conspicuous silence and enable them to become victors instead of remaining victims of oppression. Referring to her own work Haddad said:

The question of hope has great influence on the resilience of the women in the church and academia. Outrage and hope lead to the activism that drives feminist scholarship and its commitment to social change... this activist thread in feminist scholarship has not always been rooted in the voices of poor and marginalised women in South Africa. My work is inherently activist with a strong emphasis on, firstly, amplifying the voices

of women outside of the academy and, secondly, the importance of the mutuality of the relationship between the academic researcher and the women she works with (Haddad 2002:6-7).

## **Doing Theology in Community with Others**

One of the key characteristics of Haddad's theological engagement is that it is not done in isolation from other women theologians. Unlike most of her peers, she tends to work with other women in curving her theology. Two groups have been significant in her theological discourse. These are the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the Women's Manyanos. It is from these groups that she has found both her intellectual homes and dialogue partners. I would like to reflect on them, so as to locate her theological discourses.

### **Haddad and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**

Haddad has been an active member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians for a number of years. Through the Circle, African women were drawing resources from themselves and scriptures to reflect on their situation and experiences. Drawing from a diverse body of theologies from the various faith traditions, Islam, African, Christian, Hindu and Jewish, they discovered and taught that women too were people of worth and dignity. Haddad argued:

Their work has stood against the image of African women as poor, helpless victims in need of support and aid. Instead, there has been a strong tradition within the Circle of foregrounding notions of dignity, strength, resilience and independence (Haddad 2021:3)

It is in this group that she found her intellectual home or community, through which her works could be inspired and in which her own struggle as a woman could be discussed and disseminated. Referring to the Circle she once wrote:

In assessing Circle publications as a whole, it becomes clear that at the heart of this body of work lies three assumptions. Firstly, women seek to be in egalitarian relationships with men who bring dignity and respect. Secondly, women assert their agency to achieve this goal and in so doing bring healing and wholeness to both groups who are transformed

through this process. Thirdly, women assert their agency in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. However, what is less clear is how these assumptions relate directly to economic issues facing African women (Haddad 2021:2).

The solution to the quagmire faced by women for Haddad, is that they need to take responsibility to free themselves from oppression. She wrote:

Women need to begin to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse, and disenfranchisement within the church (Haddad 2003:155).

Reflecting on how her theological work fits in the broader project of the Circle, she went on to add that:

In assessing the body of Circle work, including my own, there is little evidence of systematic analysis of the intersection of culture and patriarchy with the globalised economy that in turn reflects on how economic systems impact African women's lives (Haddad 2021:2).

Through the Circle, African women demonstrated their own abilities and work of liberating themselves. They were not waiting for others from outside, such as white feminists or men to work for their liberation. Rather, they were agents of their own liberation. This required that anyone who wanted to be involved in this struggle must start by recognizing and appreciating the agency of African women in their liberation. Haddad said African women theologians would themselves understand their work to be liberative as they assert the agency of women (Haddad 2003:154). Therefore, for the women theologians of the Circle, theology became an asset of liberation instead of the tool of oppression as it has been used from time immemorial. In this sense it is an asset in the hands of women to be used for their empowerment. A sentiment also expressed here, "Being outcasts in their own continent and in their own churches is a uniting experience among the Circle theologians and it prompts them into creating theology that liberates" (Vähäkangas 2011:9). So, Haddad emphasizes that liberation is no longer needed as such, but that transformation is needed in today's Africa. In her words, there is a need to deconstruct the old and reconstruct the new (Haddad 1998:5).

## Manyanos as safe spaces for grassroots women

Haddad has always maintained that “Ordinary women have been making a way out of no way for generations. They have not been passive. They have talked theology; they have lived theology, Haddad calls these theologies “theologies of survival” (Haddad 1998:17). It is not surprising then that when she focused on how women in South Africa responded to the missionary endeavour through subversive actions, she developed an appreciation of the work done by the *Manyanos*;<sup>1</sup> a woman led prayer union and movement in South Africa where “The women gather in their various groups away from the public church and its dominant discourse.”<sup>2</sup> According to Haddad, *Manyanos* need to be recognised as an influential space for indigenous women (Haddad 2004). Further, the *Manyanos* should be seen as a site of struggle, survival and a form of resistance and victory over different forms of domination as they overcome the oppression of men by men. It’s a fact that women face patriarchal domination in the church and in society. So the women challenge some of the patriarchal practices in the church by voting other women into leadership positions. Haddad writes that the activities of the *Manyano* such “extempore prayer” and “preaching and the practice of fundraising using stokvel principles” are “the unique characteristics of the *Manyano* that forms the resistance to ecclesial and patriarchal domination and enable literal survival by marginalised women.” (Haddad 2004:11) In another article Haddad observed the significant role that is played by the *Manyano* in the lives of women by saying that:

The *Manyano* movement is a key site where poor and marginalised women are taking control of their lives in an attempt to alleviate their lives from the reality of poverty. (2003:429)

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- <sup>1</sup> The women’s *Manyano* is the women’s group, usually uniformed that is found in most of the mainline denominations, Methodists, Anglican, Lutheran and UCCSA. They meet once a week usually on Thursdays to pray and encourage one another as women. They have different topics and activities ranging from personal stories of Joy and pain, dancing and singing hymns, food preparations, to running business and women empowerment, affirmations and motivation.
- <sup>2</sup> Haddad Beverly (2004). “The Manyano Movement in South Africa: Site of Struggle, Survival and Resistance.” *Agenda Empowering women for Gender Equity* (61), Religion and Spirituality 4-13.

Haddad observed that women have their own incipient theologies which they use for their survival, and it is the responsibility of women theologians to analyse these theologies. She said, “For academic women engaged in theological discourse, it is imperative that the survival theologies of marginalised women be recognised” (Haddad 2004:4). Her observations are congruent with Tinyiko Maluleke’s (2000:31), who spoke of “African women’s theology that is ‘engaging in the most passionate, the most vibrant and the most prophetic forms of praxis...’ For Haddad it is in the *Manyano* movement that women actively take initiative and resist different forms of patriarchal oppression so that they are no longer victims but agents of their own survival. The *Manyano* also demand that women be afforded dignity and respect. Haddad celebrates The Manyano’s demand for respect for women because they are intentional about representing women’s aspirations in meetings and structures of the church which are heavily patriarchal. In addition to encouraging women to join the ministry and ordination the Manyano caucuses to vote for women who aspire for higher offices to ascent to those positions of influence (Haddad 2021:3). As an activist-intellectual researcher in a community with the experience of working with *Manyano* groups, Haddad calls for combining theory and activism. She emphatically states the importance of the very presence of the activist-intellectual which helps to assist the community in its search for a balance between the Gospel and cultures (Haddad 2006:153-154). In her other article, Haddad observes that the Manyano may have problematic aspects to it, however, “It is a safe site of struggle for survival against death and patriarchal oppression and resistance to dominant ecclesial forces, and thus poses certain challenges to the agenda of academic feminists” (Haddad 2004: 11).

## **Haddad’s Contribution to Women’s Theology**

Like most scholars, Haddad has made a tremendous contribution in the development of women’s theology and the theology of development.

### ***Haddad as an activist-intellectual***

I understand Feminist Theology as that branch of theological reflection which seeks to understand the issues and dynamics around development from a theological perspective. Haddad understands and appreciates this theology because of its ability to “bring the voices of marginalized women into the public space or audience” (Haddad 2004: 5).

In all of her works, she writes positively about women and how they have been endowed with gifts and talent just like men. She remains a consistent critique of patriarchy, but doing this inside the church instead of turning her back from it in spite of patriarchal tendencies. Her theology is diametrically opposed to the dominant one which places man at the centre of theological anthropology. Using both the pen and the pulpit she proposes a theology that is aimed at challenging the dominant religious discourses that promote gender discrimination both in the church and in society. Having studied and worked in the Cape in the difficult years of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, Haddad was introduced to feminist theology early in her ministry as an activist. For her, theology must be in solidarity with the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized women. Therefore, Haddad's journey and feminist theology enable women to forge what feminist theologians refer to as a "blossoming theology." Sarojini Nadar regards blossoming theology as a metaphor for women's theology characterized by changes, growth, transformation for a corporeal theology born out of women's bodies and their suffering (Nadar 2002:157). Haddad has lived, taught, written, practiced and preached blossoming theology from the moment she was appointed to start an Anglican congregation in Cape Town till her retirement from full-time academic work.

### *Haddad as an activist-priest*

Haddad's work on church and development with specific focus on women started in Cape Town, traversed the world but continues to influence and shape African women, including those in her hometown of Pietermaritzburg especially those belonging to the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Natal. Although she initially belonged to an Anglican Church that did not ordain women, dominated by oppressive theology and culture, she became a champion of gender equality that led to the transformation of the status of women in the church. Contrary to many women of her day, she did not just follow the norm of being satisfied by being a submissive, pious member of the church, but rather became a maker of free women through her work as an intellectual-activist, academic and priest. I submit that Haddad has emulated the work of Mercy Oduyoye, who "instituted a struggle against patriarchy in the church, which led to the ordination of women, but also encouraged women to remain in the church and fight their struggle from within, rather than remaining subservient or abandoning it" (Kumalo 2021:67).

Haddad is worth reflecting upon as an outstanding woman theologian in Africa, not only because of her experience as a woman of color but also because of the work she did to move the church and theology from being patriarchal and oppressive to women.

### **Haddad an HIV&AIDS Activist amongst ordinary women**

When HIV infections were at their highest, Haddad was clear in her articulations that women were greatly affected by HIV and AIDS because of patriarchy. She writes that “It is now well documented that the HIV epidemic disproportionately affects women more severely than men for a number of biological and social reasons (Haddad 2013:2). Haddad’s sentiments are affirmed by Masenya (2017:120) who writes that one of the reasons women are disproportionately affected by HIV is because of intergenerational relations which authorises older men to be in sexual relationships with younger women and adolescent girls. Because of their higher socio-economic status, older men are able to give material things to younger women and therefore control how sex is had which may include sex without using protection (Masenya 2017). Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS infection is also prevalent because women are vulnerable to rape and abuse as they search for economic survival. Women are often times forced to engage in sexual relations at gunpoint. In a study among displaced migrant women, Pertek (2022) notes that some of his respondents witnessed other migrant women dying from sexual exploitation. In these women described feeling powerless, with many losing control over their lives and lacking any real support (Pertek 2022:5). This sexual exploitation is one of the factors that increases women’s vulnerability and prevalence of HIV infections among women.

Haddad is probably the first woman theologian to refer to the HIV pandemic as “the new Kairos for theological work in South Africa” (Qiao *et al.* 2019:S35). Haddad built on the works of other scholars to develop resources for resilience. For instance, in her essay “We Pray but we Cannot Heal’: Theological Challenges Posed by the HIV/AIDS Crisis” (2006:80-90), she proposed Qiao’s “Six major resilience resources including first, internal strength second, religion and spirituality, third, hopefulness about life and future, fourth, self-awareness and self-care; fifth, social support from family and community; and sixth, HIV-related health facilities.

In addition, Haddad has focused most of her academic work on the interface between gender-based violence, HIV and the church. She asserted that:

My own early work on the link between gender-based violence and the HIV pandemic was an attempt to call the church to address the intersections of patriarchy, culture and church practice to ensure the well-being of women (Haddad 2002).

She goes on to say that:

It was also a call to women to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse and disenfranchisement within the church (Haddad 2021:4).

## **Faith as a Source of Resilience**

Religion in general and prayer in particular, has been used for survival by African women. Haddad asserts that religion for poor and marginalised women in South Africa is not a panacea for their suffering, but rather an active weapon they use in their resistance to their oppression. Survival theologies are acts of resistance and resources for development (Haddad 2003:441). Several scholars agree with Haddad that religion and faith can be sources of survival, resistance and a resource for development. For example, in his study, Pertek (2022) submits that prayers and direct relationships with God, derived from their [migrant women's] spiritual capital, were most cited in helping respondents survive unspeakable hardships. Only a minority mentioned reading religious scriptures, as these became unavailable in displacement. In addition, most women facing food scarcity fasted to get closer to God and have their prayers accepted. The power of faith in survival is also demonstrated by Paulo (2010:61) who, like Haddad, holds that women's commitment to women's group prayer meetings indicate that those prayer groups are places of safety where they feel more comfortable to share their issues with one another and together pull resources to assist those facing more difficulties. For instance, Qiao *et al.* (2019:S39) observe that in her research which was carried during the times when HIV/AIDS infections were in their all-time high that "the majority of the participants relied upon God, prayers, faith and spirituality to overcome life challenges. They expressed their need for prayers and for God to see them through their situations" (Qiao *et al.* 2019:S39).

For many, trusting in and praying to God in situations of sex trafficking, smuggling, and kidnapping were strategies to cooperate with God through seeking his care and stronger connection (Pertek 2022:8).

Hence for Haddad, faith brings hope, comfort and healing in the face of illness. Women are “provided with strength, they are able to carry out the physical demands made upon them in the everyday practices of their lives” (Haddad 2000:282). The mutual care offered by women who have heard one another’s voice, who have heard each other’s pain in public prayer has long been a major drawcard of Manyanos” (Gaitskell 1995:220). Pertek (2022:2), likewise observed that;

Prayer, turning to God, and church were essential elements of their coping processes in the aftermath of trafficking, alongside work that enabled contentment and focus.

Pertek (2022:10) further observed that;

Most women also hoped that contact with a respected religious figure would allow self-validation of their pain and progress toward religious closure of spiritual struggles. They needed reassurance from sacred knowledge beyond their reach to clarify internalised beliefs associated with abuse experienced. Without access to prayer spaces or religious texts, and with a minority fearing sanctions for spoken-out-loud prayers in Libyan detentions, survivors would intensify “inward worship” through individual silent prayers (Pertek 2022:7).

Paulo (2010:66) agreed with Haddad, Pertek and Qiao that;

Women’s commitment to women’s group prayer meetings has some indications that the group is a place of safety where they feel more comfortable to share their issues with one another and together pull resources to assist those facing more difficulties.

Speaking out is one way of resisting and restoring life among women. Women became victorious through speaking out. Haddad (2000:367-368) noted that;

Women began to speak openly in the group about sexual matters such as rape and the virginity testing of their daughters, about women’s oppression through widowhood, polygamy, and being forced to live after marriage with her husband’s family. They not only articulated what was previously unspoken, they also at times enacted through role playing overt liberatory resistance actions, such as mass community action to stop rape in the community. They disseminated information amongst other women in the community about the dangers of AIDS and virginity testing, speech which had been practised in the group beforehand.

These prayers of women reveal their daily life experiences, particularly their daily struggle to survive food crises and poverty, based on their faith in God. They identify God as the one who sides with them by meeting their spiritual, economic and health needs (Paulo 2010:69). “Therefore, there is understanding among women that having faith does bring positivity” (Haddad 2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter reflected on Beverley Haddad’s work as an intellectual-activist with a commitment to reflecting on African Women’s resistance, resilience and survivors of gender-based oppression. Her story is one of a continuous struggle against the complicit collaboration between religion and culture in the oppression of women, especially on the African continent. Her commitment to the Theology and Development Programme was a form of resistance. Her contribution there is twofold: First, she has raised our awareness to the complicity of the church and culture in the perpetuation of patriarchal tendencies. Second, she raised our awareness on the strength of African women to survive exploitation and oppression both in church and society. Third, she taught us that the church can be a safe space that natures women’s resilience and agency as they engage in struggles against all forms of oppression. Indeed, she has not only seen women becoming victors instead of victims of patriarchy in the church and society, but she has contributed in their struggle to free themselves.

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# 11 | Theologizing with Joyce Vilakati in the Eswatini Kingdom:

A Feminist Critical Interpretation of Historical Texts

*Sonene Nyawo*

## Abstract

African women theologians, using gendered lenses, challenge the pervasive rhetoric that depicts African women as inferior, inexpressive and docile. These theologians are committed to magnifying the whimpering voices of African women victims and survivors of the patriarchal wrath, irrespective of their religious associations. Amongst them are African matriarchs, whom we hold in high esteem as founders and earliest champions of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle). Through research and publication, these founders have made historical contributions towards the expansion of the Circle since its inception in 1989. As torch bearers, they have continued to swim against the patriarchal tide, and denounced hierarchies that promote power imbalances between women and men. Now, it is time to celebrate their role in shaping the membership of the Circle into strong, resilient and resourceful women. Some of these champions might have changed residence, and are in the other world, whilst others have aged to remember their contribution. Retrieving their insights is more to recognise that they still speak to our hearts and minds. This chapter is therefore an exploration of five (5) selected works of Joyce Vilakati, a feminist literary critic who engages with historical texts to discover the hidden voices of women, whilst exposing patriarchal beliefs and stereotypes that relegate women to the periphery.

**Keywords:** Feminists, historical texts, interpretation, patriarchy and Joyce Vilakati

## Introduction

Joyce Tsabedze who is the subject of this narrative inquiry is discussed as Joyce Vilakati. Five years after attending the Convocation of African

Women Theologians at Trinity College Legon-Accra September 24th - October 2nd, 1989, her legal identity changed as she reverted to use of her maiden name Vilakati. A legal process which was concluded in 1994 nullified her marriage. That personal experience became the crucible of her constantly developing and multidimensional feminist hermeneutics. At another level, Ms Vilakati's journey in biblical hermeneutics has undergone a massive shift since she presented at the said convocation on "Women in the church [1 Timothy 2:15, Ephesians 5:22]". When she wrote and presented her short paper with the foregoing title, she was concerned to argue for a contextualised reading of biblical texts without much critique of the context itself that shaped scriptural content. Many years later, she still believes biblical texts are to be read in context but that such a context itself needs critique and ideological contestation from an explicitly identified hermeneutical perspective.

In yet another sense, biblical scholarship for her is no longer about a narrow focus on publishing disciplinary research but about the intersectionality of teaching and learning in her field. This latter development emerged from her constant passion for teaching and learning which found resonance when she came across the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in the early 2000s. Since then, for Ms Vilakati, biblical scholarship has been informed by a constant reflection on the professional practice of teaching and learning. She happily identifies as a founding member of the Circle of African Women Theologians under the pioneering and visionary leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Although Ms Vilakati's professional work has seen her growing away from the Circle instead of into it, the Circle remains a significant catalytic narrative point in her hermeneutical development. Her hermeneutical journey is best conceived as a trench coat of many colours that her Momma and many other women [and some men!] made *with* her.

As a biblical scholar, and throughout her professional lane, Vilakati has remained committed to the precepts of the Feminist Critical Theory which primarily calls for the interpretation of biblical narratives through a lens that highlights the voice and agency (or lack thereof) of women (Vilakati, 2002). Her critical engagement with the biblical texts helps her see certain themes popping out, which define female experiences, expose patriarchy whilst saving women from being 'the other' (Clifford, 2001). Her critical analysis to a text reflects in her papers, where women are portrayed as: sharing in the divine image in their human' beingness'; desirable life partners to men; the first to stray from God's instructions;

deservedly consigned to subordination to men; instigators of incestuous reproductive relationships; prone to rivalry among themselves; eavesdroppers; humble and hospitable to strangers; blackmailers; tricksters; part of the material possessions of the men in their lives; taking leadership initiatives and demonstrating agility at such; of loose virtue; conniving; available for savage disposal by the men who have socially sanctioned claim over them; positively resourceful; being sources of wise counsel to children and rulers; dogging pious men; generous; wealthy; exemplars of religious devotion; capable of profound bonds between each other; holding their own in theological conversation with men of high standing; and them being innately fickle. What this chapter therefore discusses is her hermeneutical journey which also highlights summaries of selected academic papers. Her critical approach to biblical texts is then contextualised to conclude the discussion.

## **Her Hermeneutical Journey**

When pursuing her post graduate studies, Vilakati, for her area of specialisation, chose to be in biblical studies with a concentration in Old Testament. Her passion lay with a literary approach to the Bible due to her background and love for literature. For Vilakati, the Bible is a composite literary masterpiece and a minefield for enthralling cognitive and social engagements. Put differently, Vilakati finds God to be far more than what is recorded about God in the Christian Bibles. The Bible reflects the human struggle to comprehend God through the human failings and imperfections. Thus, it is a script inviting all of human characters to participate in the quest to establish a meaningful relationship with God. That is why in her biblical studies courses she has developed and shared with her students two mutually enforcing mantras, namely; how one reads the Bible has fundamentally to do with how one views the Bible; and for every interpretation of any given biblical text, there is a practical consequence. In the early phase of her biblical scholarship, Vilakati had not yet developed a “hard-nosed”<sup>1</sup> hermeneutic as suggested by Mosala (1989). Such

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<sup>1</sup> This is a hermeneutical construct coined by Itumeleng J. Mosala and used in his book where he critiques the contextual hermeneutics of Black theologians whom he faults for exhibiting an unstructural understanding of the Bible as well as the unstructural understanding of the black experience and struggle.

a hermeneutic, explains Mosala, is based on a comprehensive definition of the complex nature of the entire Bible as a text that is multi-vocal hence it contains both liberatory and counter-liberatory messages despite the editorial attempts that were taken to harmonise it. Persuaded by Mosala's argument, Vilakati has subsequently grown in her hermeneutical journey and in the process has received influence from other biblical scholars too many to recount in this writing space. However, she mentions with distinction the intellectual mentorship of such women and men as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Renita Weems, Phyllis Bird, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Ilana Pardes, Gerald West, Jeremy Punt, David Clines, Norman Gottwald, and Cheryl Exum. In the area of critical theory including feminist theory, Vilakati has received monumental shaping influence from bell hooks (Gloria Watson)<sup>2</sup> and Terry Eagleton. With these influences, Vilakati is now able to clearly define her hermeneutic in any analysis of a biblical text.

## A Selection of Vilakati's Academic Papers

At an annual BOLESWA Conference in 1988, themed 'The Role of Women in Social Transformation', Vilakati presented a paper titled A Biblical Portrait of Woman. In this seminal work, she paints in bold strokes the portrait of biblical women that emerges from the depiction of specific female characters and/or from rules and injunctions pertaining to their place in various social spaces from the family through community enclaves to wider society. Vilakati's purpose in this paper was to present a problematized view of women as overtly and covertly encoded in the Bible and through that to demonstrate that there is no unified, fixed, and stable portrait of women in the Bible but a complex if paradoxical one. Building around a schematic framework to structure her analysis, Vilakati goes on to observe that there is a potpourri of negative, affirming, paradoxical, and obscure images of women in the Bible. Her schema was to look into matters of women's human agency; ascribed roles; ontological descriptions of femininity; imputations on their moral standing and

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See Mosala, I.J. (1989 reprint. in 1990). *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>2</sup> See Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.

motives.<sup>3</sup> Vilakati's conclusion was that trumping a singular view of women from the Bible has no sound basis in the pages of the biblical text. Set against the conference theme, the motivation for this paper was to sound a cautionary note to say there would not be any exclusive position to tout as an archetypical basis to either include or exclude women from processes of transformation in any society.

In 1989, Vilakati presented a paper at the Convocation of African Women Theologians, Trinity College, Legon-Accra, with the title, Women in the church [1 Timothy 2:15, Ephesians 5:22]. In this, brief paper presentation, Vilakati adopts a historical critical reading of the two texts that respectively proclaim a ban on women's participation in religious instruction in the church (1 Timothy 2:15) and command women to be submissive to their husbands as to the Lord coupling the latter with declaring the headship of husbands over their wives. Vilakati is concerned to underscore the cultural conditioning of the texts and to argue that such has resulted in the androcentric views of the world behind the text being inscribed in them. Vilakati's interpretive focus here is on exposing the androcetrisism encoded in the biblical text in view of the fact that it is texts like these, *inter alia*, that have been used over the ages by the church to rule against women's ordination. Delivering a paper with such a concern at the historic Convocation of African Women Theologians was of epistemic cogency given that the close of the decade of the 1980s was a time during which the issue of the exclusion of the women from the priesthood was being hotly contested not only within the ecclesial context but also within academia specifically in the interrelated disciplines of feminist theology and feminist hermeneutics.

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<sup>3</sup> In the paper it is noted that women are portrayed for example as: sharing in the divine image in their human 'beingness'; desirable life partners to men; the first to stray from God's instructions; deservedly consigned to subordination to men; instigators of incestuous reproductive relationships; prone to rivalry among themselves; eavesdroppers; humble and hospitable to strangers; blackmailers; tricksters; part of the material possessions of the men in their lives; taking leadership initiatives and demonstrating agility at such; of loose virtue; conniving; available for savage disposal by the men who have socially sanctioned claim over them; positively resourceful; being sources of wise counsel to children and rulers; dogging pious men; generous; wealthy; exemplars of religious devotion; capable of profound bonds between each other; holding their own in theological conversation with men of high standing; innately fickle; etc.

Applying a synchronous and in-front of the text<sup>4</sup> method of reading, Vilakati published in *UNISWA Research Journal Volume 16*, titled, Lomalongelo's Suppressed Quest for Religious Freedom: Gender Construction in the Book of Job. In this paper she explores the construction of gender in the book of Job with particular attention to the narrative frame (Job 1-2 and Job 42:7-17). The focus is on exploring the gendered nature of the narrativity of Job's theological struggle around the mystery of innocent suffering. As a reader committed to gender equality as well as social inclusion in general, Vilakati exposes the disproportionate narrative portrayal of the male and female characters in this biblical drama and points out the gender implications of this skewed narrativity. For internal evidence in the text, the article foregrounds several narrative details. First, the focus of the story is overly on Job, the male character, much against his introduction at the beginning of the story as a family man who has been blessed with ten children – Vilakati finds it interpretively significant that the story registers only Job's parentage to the children without once mentioning that of their mother much against natural logic. Second, is the flitting insertion of Job's wife which comes with a calculated immediate and definitive ejection of her from the grand tale such that she is absent even in the epilogue of the text when Job's life and fortunes are restored. A third detail that is highlighted in Vilakati's analysis is demonization of Job's wife trauma-filled questioning of her husband's apparent stoic response to the family's tragic experiences. According to Vilakati this serves as an ideological justification of the marginalisation of Mrs Job which has remarkably succeeded to enlist many interpreters of the story from each age in the act of unduly vilifying her as an unholy antagonist in the story.

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<sup>4</sup> Vilakati notes that Mrs Job's appearance in the story is restricted to a single verse at Job 2:9 that reads, *Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."* and that she is then dismissed in the next verse as a boorish woman who ought to know better than what she has said about God. For Vilakati, she's afforded this momentary narrative space to protest bitterly about hers and her husband's indescribable suffering via an invective against her husband. Vilakati departs from the age-old interpretations of Mrs Job's words as morally misguided and intended to beguile her husband in his impeccable path of faithfulness to God and instead sees them as an authentic response to the trauma that came with catastrophic events that she and her husband had gone through as a family.

Overall, Vilakati's gender analytic lens leads her to argue that it is not an innocuous narrative act that the author of the biblical story privileges and prioritises Job's faith struggle while quashing that of his wife, thus reducing Mrs Job to a mere foil character. Rather, Vilakati continues to argue, Mrs Job's momentary insertion in the story<sup>5</sup> is designed to explain her relegation to the background while the narrative spotlight overwhelmingly shines on her husband. Thus, Vilakati concludes, this disparity in the narrative portraits of Job and his wife is neither a benign literary wrinkle nor an authorial slip but both a function and a consequence of the underlying gender inequalities prevailing in the community that produced the text. Vilakati interprets Mrs Job's brutal silencing and ejection from her husband's epic crisis of faith as suppression of her quest for religious freedom and ultimately draws a hermeneutical analogy between it and women's exclusion from theological instruction and learning in the patriarchal community in which Job's text is set.

Continuing her interest in Joban studies and still adopting an in-front of the text reading strategy, Vilakati has an article in BOLESWA Occasional Papers Vol. 1 Number 9, with the title, God's Vulnerability and Human Vitality in the book of Job. Here, conducts a comparative analysis of the characterisation of the figure of God and that of the *satan* character within the narrative unit of the text alternately known in Old Testament scholarship as the Divine Wager/Joban Wager.<sup>6</sup> This is the part of the text

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<sup>6</sup> In the Prologue (Job 1-2) of Job, God is reported to have entered into a bet (wager) with a member of the heavenly council, the *satan* (executioner) by which God grants permission to the latter to test Job's integrity by taking away his material possessions and decimating his ten children. In the narrative context, God is shown to be extremely proud of Job's devotion to God, so proud as to initiate the bet with the *satan* so as to demonstrate the exemplary piety of Job.

where God is reportedly in dialogue with the Satan (*ha satan*) a personality understood in Jewish theology as the adversary of human beings distinctly known for being a master of deception and/or a physical executioner. Vilakati specifically applies a deconstructionist analysis of the narrativity of God's portrayal within the Divine Wager. The central observation in the paper is that the portrait of God that emerges from the Divine/Joban Wager is embarrassingly unflattering in contrast to that of the satan. Vilakati highlights that God comes through in the text as naïve, unwitting, rash, unperceptive, and therefore recklessly gambles with Job's life by surrendering him to the executioner who, true to character seizes the moment and strikes Job with tragedy after tragedy in swift succession such that he forlornly ends up on ash heap in ill health and barely able to afford so much as a whimper. By contrast, Vilakati continues to observe, the satan is in his best element, effortlessly gains the upper hand in the sport and gets both God and Job where he wants them to be – estranged! The paper goes on to posit that once God and Job are estranged, the stage is set for Job to engage in a bitter and protracted struggle to protest his unwarranted suffering while God remains absent (and perhaps oblivious to Job's sad state of affairs?) by God's silence. Vilakati argues that this narrative depiction of God and the satan reasonably, and scandalously so at that – results in exploding the dogmatic conceptions of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. On the other hand, it evinces human vitality (resilience) in that Job subsequently emerges from the weight of this crushing experience and finds strength to wrestle with God and his friends. The paper concludes by underscoring the ambiguous value of dogma in theological construction in that it does not capture the whole truth about some core beliefs, especially some of those that are purportedly based on biblical content.

In the paper *Faith without Wisdom is Dead: An Exploration of the Integration of the Wisdom Traditions and Jewish Faith in the Old Testament*, Vilakati explores the integration of the Wisdom traditions into the Jewish faith expression in the Old Testament (OT). The impetus for this hermeneutical exploration is the observation that the books designated as Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job) in the OT do not at first glance seem to have an obvious theological connection with the texts of the Torah that enjoy a distinct position of esteem in the Jewish rule of faith. Adopting holism as a theoretical perspective, Vilakati argues that mundane as the wisdom traditions appear to be at a superficial level, they do have a profound albeit subtle connection with the celebrated covenant

traditions of the Torah and that neither tradition speaks in full of Jewish faith apart from the other. She uses the combined constituent elements of wisdom to demonstrate their significance for incorporation to faith practice. The said elements as proposed by Ryan (2008) are: (1) wisdom as epistemic humility, (2) wisdom as factual knowledge, (3) wisdom as useful knowledge, and (4) wisdom as successful living.<sup>7</sup> Building on this definition of wisdom, the paper argues that these aspects make for spiritual discernment which is a necessary intuitive dynamic that enables a person of faith to transit safely and congruently to and from between faith and practice. Part of the exploration, Vilakati inserts the gender dimension by positing that it is incumbent on women as part of the community of faith to recognise the reciprocal link between faith and wisdom to their benefit. In addition, she highlights that the patriarchal biblical text does not succeed to obliterate women's role in embodying, generating, and dispensing wisdom despite overtures in the internal hermeneutics of the Bible to present wisdom as a male preserve. The main title of the paper, *Faith Without Wisdom is Dead*, is an intertextual rhetorical appropriation of the argument of the New Testament Letter of James.

### **Vilakati's Gender Analytical Lens discussed within Context**

Vilakati is a Liswati woman, whose hermeneutical journey has unfolded whilst growing up in a context where culture and western Christianity is an intertwined web. The patriarchal nature of the Swati society often fuels behaviour where women are seen as subordinates to men. Family members for instance are positioned in hierarchical power relations where males have authority over women, and women are obligated to comply with the authority that has been defined within these relationships. The husband is therefore culturally accepted as the ruler of the family, and is regarded as the formal authority to whom the wife and children owe their allegiance (Nyawo, 2014).

The advent of Christianity in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) is unique in that it was at the initiative of a religio-cultural figure, the king, who was and is viewed as a unifying factor and a symbol of culture and religion to the nation. Eswatini consequently built her socio-economic and political

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<sup>7</sup> Ryan, S., 2008, 'Wisdom', in E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008 edn., n.p. Retrieved August 2008, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/wisdom/>

ideology upon shared cultural values and the Bible; thus making culture and religion an intricate and intertwined web (Nyawo, 2014). The duo therefore becomes an inseparable pair in defining the status of women as subordinate actors of history. Also, it gives men the status as heads of households and decision-makers, all of which accords them control over members of that family (WLSA 2001). Kabonde (1996, 213) confirms these sentiments by stating that “cultural teachings are so intimately related to religious teachings such that religion cannot be divorced from culture; thus the two act upon each other, they influence each other and they propagate each other;” hence, Vilakati’s advocacy for Christian Feminist theology versus Christian theology introduced by predominantly male missionaries, which engages biblical texts uncritically. This is how Clifford (2001, 29) defines Christian theology of the missionaries;

“a gender blind” concept because it is faith in God being brought to understanding from the perspective of male experience... this is the type of theology that only incorporates the lived experiences of relationship to God of Christian men, and women’s experiences of God relatedness are excluded.

Rakoczy (2004), Clifford (2001), and Riley (1989) attribute the adaptation of Christian theology into the biblical texts and social contexts to the influence of Greek and Latin classics on early and medieval church fathers. They argue that over the centuries many Christian theologians have treated women not only as “dissimilar species” but also as a defective one (Clifford, 2001:30). Drawing on *Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, Augustine, On the Trinity Book, and Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*, Clifford summarises the theologies of church fathers as follows;

Tertullian (ca 160-225b) characterized women as “the devil’s gateway,” Augustine (ca 354-430) argued that man alone can fully image God; a woman images God only with her husband, Aquinas (ca 1225-74) influenced by Aristotle spoke of women as “defective” and “misbegotten” (Clifford, 2001:30).

The distinctive feature of Christian theology therefore is the exclusion of women’s relational experiences with God. The least to happen when women’s experiences are embraced in theological discourse is to pick on negative female figures in the Bible to warn society about the dangerous species known as “women” (Clifford, 2001:29). For example, I have observed in my society Eswatini that it cannot be a successful tent revival

meeting without male evangelists preaching about the story of the “promiscuous” Samaritan woman that met Jesus at the well (John 4:1-33). Emphasis is put on the woman’s loose character that could only change if she would drink from the living water, and she would not thirst again. The prompt response of the Samaritan woman to the “good news” of Jesus, and that she was the first evangelist in Samaria, a gentile territory, can either be mentioned haphazardly in sermons, or not at all. Other examples of biblical women characters that are usually represented negatively in churches, and who church women are warned against, are Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-28) and Queen Vashti (Esther 1:122). Queen Jezebel is often portrayed as an evil-hearted manipulator that led astray her husband King Ahab of Israel and the entire nation into idolatry; her good traits - that she was a strategist, an intelligent, courageous and tactful woman - are never mentioned in sermons. Similarly, instead of stressing the courage of Queen Vashti to safeguard her dignity against all odds, pastors’ sermons usually focus on the price she paid for being disrespectful to her husband’s command.

The last example of a woman’s character is Ruth who is always cited as a point of reference to young women in terms of their relationship with their in-laws. Her sacrifice of her own happiness to remarry at her homeland and her decision to relocate to a foreign land in order to serve her mother-in-law is what is emphasised in most sermons. That “Ruth is a role model not because she is docile and submissive, but because she transcends her gender and her ethnicity to ensure her survival” (Nadar, 2000:81) is least mentioned. Masenya (1998) has also participated in the Ruth discourse, which she says captures her attention as a Sotho woman raised in a patriarchal space where relationships between brides and their mother-in-laws are problematic. Furthermore, she uses the same narrative on Ruth to draw out definitions of what Africans view as worthy womanhood, which she says emerge from various Bible interpretations shaped by different African cultures. For example, in Ruth 3:11, Boaz, the wealthy Judahite man, informs Ruth, the poor foreign (Moabite) widow, that the assembly of Judahite men knows that she is the woman of substance (2010:2). Masenya discusses the images portrayed in the passage in juxtaposition with the definitions of womanhood prescribed in African proverbs, which African women are obliged to exhibit. Thus, as Masenya and other feminist critical scholars have concluded, Christian theology and African cultures are largely entwined.

In contrast, the Christian feminist theology, which Vilakati and others stand for, seeks to liberate theology from a centuries-long pattern of “patriarchal myopia”, where women’s lived experiences of their relationship with God are incorporated in theological discourse (Clifford, 2001:29). This is congruent with the definition of feminism articulated by Oduyoye (1986:121); that feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women’s experiences should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being a human. Christian feminist theology seeks to read the Bible “with African eyes” that would help women to recognise their potential to effect positive social change, whilst developing a greater sense of their human dignity (Rakoczy, 2004:174). This can be effectively facilitated through employing feminist theological hermeneutics, a criterion which looks at whether a particular text promotes male advantage at the expense of women’s dignity or any group of people whose life has been diminished by patriarchy (Clifford, 2004:37). As further noted by Clifford, this feminist approach;

...is interested in more than raising awareness of the manifestations of patriarchy and of constructing a liberating interpretation of biblical revelation and church teachings; it seeks to make a difference in the Christian community and civil society (2001:37).

## CONCLUSION

From the seminal works of Vilakati, we see the feminist critical theory used as the framework that premises her engagement with biblical texts. Her theology confirms what other pioneers of the Circle of Concerned Women have ceaselessly proclaimed; that the eradication of all forms of women’s oppression caused by societal, cultural and religious patriarchy, is required (Phiri, 2004). Their theological and methodological frameworks are significant in engaging inequality issues in all social agents. Kanyoro (2001a; 2001b) adds that it is not enough to analyze culture without reference to the people who are beneficiaries and victims of the culture; “here is where the need arises for a gender sensitive cultural hermeneutics because it performs two functions as it addresses issues of culture, while being critical of that culture from a gender perspective”

(2001b:164). Rakoczy (2004:150) highlights the three arguments that underpin feminist hermeneutics. Paraphrased, they are that: the Bible has been used a tool to subjugate women and deplete their personhood; the authority of the Bible has been internalised; and Scriptures must be re-read and re-interpreted. Cultural hermeneutics therefore, is a key to the liberation of women in Africa because it opens the eyes of African women not to blindly succumb to socio-cultural and religious expectations (Kanyoro, 2001a:106). As Hinga (1990:34) has further observed, cultural hermeneutics “is meant not only to counteract the oppressive impact of the Bible, but also to create hope and a will to change oppressive situations and structures”, thus affirming women’s human dignity and personhood. Vasanthakumar (1997:43) drawing on Casalis (1984) posits that hermeneutics has four dimensions:

it translates a divine message into human words; it transposes what was said “at that time” into contemporary categories; it reclaims possession of the text and its meaning from those who have unwarrantedly locked them away; and it revives the past in order to retain its value for the present.

Application of liberative hermeneutics therefore, in socio-cultural and religious contexts like Eswatini would mean re-reading and re-interpreting the biblical narratives which societies use to abuse women and trample on their God-given rights. These dominant readings as West (1995) prefers to call them, have widely accepted interpretations that embody dominant values and beliefs, and they position a reader to favour them. Feminist critical readings, as demonstrated by Vilakati in her works, therefore manifest the injustices against women widely believed to be justified by the bible, whilst at the same time are an empowering force to women in families, church and in the entire society.

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## 12 | Dennis Ackermann's Feminist Theology of Praxis: Formed in Lament

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### Abstract

Dennis Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis was forged in lament. Steeped in the dehumanising apartheid system, she wrestled with collective and personal experiences of suffering, pain, and trauma. A review of her background demonstrates her practice as an engaged activist scholar who grounded her understanding of lament as an ancient practice, replete in the Hebrew Scriptures. Her depth of understanding of lament is brought to bear on her reflections of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and her links to a protest movement known as, The Black Sash, highlighting the context of the marginalized and traumatized. Her weighty deliberations about the loss of lament reveal significant theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political implications for the faith community. Calling for public lament, Ackermann's insights prove instructive today for the faith community to engage in matters of justice in society.

**Keywords:** Dennis Ackermann, public lament, embodied spirituality, feminist praxis

### Introduction

Denise M. Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis was forged in lament. Soaked in the historic pathos of a brutal, dehumanising apartheid system, she wrestled with trauma, personal anguish, and communal pain in pathways of resistance. Rooting her theological pilgrimage in personal and collective experiences of suffering, Ackermann opted for an embodied spirituality in tension with the *status quo* of most faith communities ("Reconciliation" 59-60). Hers has been engaged activist scholarship immersed in the struggles of the marginalised and traumatised, struggling with the implications of the loss of lament for the faith community.

Ackermann's contributions reflecting on individual and communal lament speak to us today and provide guidance of how to move toward the dream of God for a just society.

This chapter takes a tour through Ackermann's theology of lament, recapturing its relevance for our times. First, what follows is a brief sketch of Ackermann's background and life's work, providing a glimpse into the formation of her theology of lament. Second, the chapter provides a brief look at how Ackermann drew her understanding from historic sources of antiquity and the Hebrew bible. Third, the ways Ackermann experienced the context of South Africa will be recounted to understand how it spawned the formation of her praxis of lament. Fourth, the implications of the absence of lament for the church and society will be considered. Finally, Ackermann's call for public lament will show how lament may be a necessary language for our times.

## A Revered Ragbag Theologian<sup>1</sup>

Denise M. Ackermann came to theology late in life, producing extensive works on a variety of topics such as ethics, feminist liberation theology, spirituality, theological anthropology, freedom of religion, difference, violence against women and children, feminist hermeneutics, and the subject of this chapter, lament ("Found Wanting" 267). Ackermann's PhD was an extensive study of the Black Sash, a human rights organisation she was intimately acquainted with as part of her praxis in society (*Liberating Praxis*). During her time as an academic Ackermann crafted theological responses to the African context including apartheid, gender issues, the proceedings of the TRC, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and ecological crises (Taljaard, 41). Ackermann has a lifelong history in the Anglican church yet, she was steeped in the Reformed tradition and her faith was inclusive, ecumenical, and communal in scope (Smit, 169). Her theology was about "life, healing, justice, freedom, hope" and a passion for all of creation (170).

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<sup>1</sup> A Festschrift dedicated to Ackermann retrieves this affectionate term as a metaphor attributed to the honouree for her eclectic works, which like a collection of diverse colourful fabrics highlight her use of theological concepts for everyday use (Pillay et al., 6). The Festschrift, ends with an extensive list documenting a wide breadth of publications and presentations produced over the course of her career (Pillay et al., 267-268).

As a prolific theologian, Ackermann acted as a seasoned editor and mentor through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle), where she helped to establish the Cape Town chapter in 1992 (Nadar "Feminist Theologies" 271, 277). Ackermann is described as a "feminist theologian of praxis" influenced by liberation theology with a passion for justice (Pillay et al., 6).<sup>2</sup> Ackermann describes her theological reflection as born from the "legacy of patriarchal traditions and biased interpretations of scripture" and attempts to "dismantle discriminating practices in the church" ("Found Wanting" 270). Her theology of praxis is marked by solidarity with those on the margins of power, acquainted with grief and the practice of lament, while exercising agency and resistance to death-dealing systems.

Immersed in concern for a fractured society and earth groaning from the grips of patriarchy, violence and injustice, Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis was born from cycles of action and reflection, grappling with oppressive societal and ecclesial ills ("A Voice" 80-81). In the company of others from the Circle, she challenged sexism, racism, and classism through a focus on praxis, theological innovation, social advocacy, and partnership with men to resist the repression of African women through inequality and discrimination (Nadar "Circles" 147-154).

Although she started as the only woman in a faculty of men at the University of the Western Cape (a historically black university) in an era of sexism, she garnered the respect of male colleagues over time, evidenced by the contributors to her Festschrift on the occasion of her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (Pillay et al., 7).<sup>3</sup> Ackermann admitted to being influenced by respected feminist theologians such as Beverly Wildung Harrison, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, and Dorothee Solle ("Engaging Freedom" 36). Her theology was also shaped in dialogue with contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> See more on Ackermann's description of a feminist theology of praxis in "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," (32-49).

<sup>3</sup> Allan Boesak's *Farwell to Innocence* suggests the use of the term *black* reflects solidarity instead of division among an "Apartheid-inspired false consciousness between 'coloureds,' 'Indians,' and 'Bantu'" (or Black Africans), placing groups in competition for positions of favour in proximity to whiteness (139). He affirmed a natural synergy between Black Consciousness and Black Theology leading to a "*black* solidarity which encompasses all the different ethnic groups in the black community" as the oppressed seeking a "community of blackness" (139).

theologians, many of whom were part of the Circle (Nadar “Circles” 147-148).

To some extent, Ackermann was aware of her limitations in speaking to the black experience as a member of the privileged white minority (“Lamenting Tragedy” 214-215).<sup>4</sup> In a country where the black majority were unjustly relegated to a place of non-being through a long history of colonial and apartheid disenfranchisement of all *non-white* bodies, there would remain limits to Ackermann’s ability to empathise. The rise of Black Consciousness and Black Theology in the 1980s recognized the need for the majority of South Africans to spurn systemic disdain, advocating for the dignity and worth of the black majority to govern and determine their future.

Ackermann recognised lament as a spontaneous response for the victims of white repression (“Lamenting Tragedy” 220). At the same time, she urged those who bore responsibility for enforcing massive suffering to come to awareness as a precursor to lament. According to Ackermann, such awareness would need to be embedded in memory, acceptance of accountability, repentance and reparations, without the guarantee of forgiveness for lament to be genuine (220). By highlighting the horrifying experiences of black people such as those brought to national consciousness by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Ackermann sought to reckon with the deadly legacy of white supremacy, calling the white minority to embrace processes seeking truth, accountability, and justice (220).

## A Brief History of Lament

This section highlights key sources which influenced Ackermann’s conceptualisation of public lament as a cathartic form necessary for the South African context. She draws from the ancient practice of lament as

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue Ackermann could have been more self-critical of her positionality or social location in her writings when addressing black pain and trauma, needing a greater emphasis on the inherent challenges of white superiority in the theological enterprise. See George J. van Wyngaard’s exploration of the challenge to white theologians in “White Theology in Dialogue with Black Theology: Exploring the Contribution of Klippiess Kritzinger” (“White Theology in Dialogue with Black Theology” 1-9) and “Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology: Liberating Ministry to the White Community 1988–1990” (“Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology” 1-9).

a starting point acknowledging the need for a public expression of injury. In recognising lament as an ancient practice with biblical roots, she lays a foundation for further critical reflection on the subject.

## **An Ancient Practice**

Ackermann described lament from antiquity and biblical traditions, bringing it into conversation with contemporary issues (“Lamenting Tragedy” 221-231). She uncovers the role of lament in antiquity, which often included effusive outpourings of grief from personal disasters and societal tragedies (222). Lament was expressed “at the core of rituals for both individual and communal mourning,” accompanied by music, dancing, wailing, recited poetry or dirges (229). “In communal laments, a professional class of mourners, usually women, perform the rituals which express grief and loss” (222). Such expressions included public dismay over the collapse and plunder of cult centres and cities, mourning the dead, literary and performative tragedies, and lament at funerals co-opted in service of the state (224).

Lament often provided a public outlet for women’s sorrow. In a patriarchal society, lamenting gave women temporary control over rites of death, whereas midwives already had control over birth (Ackermann “Lamenting Tragedy” 224). The pre-eminence of women weeping and wailing in communal practices of lament, both as family members and professional mourners, was allowed and curtailed by the “state’s ability and power to preserve order” (224).

## **A Biblical Tradition**

Biblical studies scholar Kathleen O’Connor, known for in-depth exegetical studies of the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, describes lament as an impassioned supplicatory form of prayer:

“Laments are prayers that erupt from wounds, burst out of unbearable pain, and bring it to language. Laments complain, shout, and protest. They take anger and despair before God and the community. They grieve. They argue. They find fault.” (loc. 313)

Ackermann purports there is much to learn from ancient Israel’s robust tradition of lament, reflected throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (“Lamenting Tragedy” 226):

From the time of leaders like Moses and Joshua, through the lamentations on the fall of Jerusalem, to the lament of the people in exile in Second Isaiah, Israel spoke out in complaint against God. When Moses, Samson, Elijah, David, Jeremiah, Job or the psalmists raised their voices, they did so in different times, contexts and literary forms.

Ackermann often brings biblical stories of lament by women like Rachel or Tamar, into conversation with contemporary stories of suffering and trauma of women in Africa (*Tamar's Cry*). Biblical accounts of lament show layers of complexity beyond the expression of grief. Lament emerges from suffering and hope as an enigmatic disturbance encompassing the profane and the sacred, “awareness and memory, anger and relief, desires for vengeance, forgiveness and healing” (Ackermann “Lamenting Tragedy” 221).

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann contends the lament Psalms rise as insistent shrill complains about life, demanding current conditions are intolerable, obligating God to change things (*The Psalms* 105). Lament is part of genuine covenant interaction between people and God where “legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power” can be addressed (*The Psalms* 104).

Ackermann draws from ancient and biblical traditions of lament, to aid in giving language to memories of suffering and guilt before God, reflecting the stories immersed in the South African context (“Reconciliation” 61). Ultimately, Ackermann pulls from the grassroots life experiences of oppressed women and her history of wrestling with apartheid as a beneficiary of the legacy of white colonial settlers. As a result, she found the Black Sash, a human rights organisation mainly composed of white middle-class women resisting repression, and the Circle of Concerned African Women as sources of advocacy and inspiration as will be seen in the following section (Nadar “Circles” 153).

## **A Context of Lament: The Witness of the Black Sash and the TRC**

The dreadful history of South Africa is a context which gives birth to lament. Ackermann describes the country as a wounded and impaired society “in dire need of healing from the enmeshed legacies of decades of racial oppression and exploitation” (“Take up” 137). Deplorable conditions created by embedded segregation and discrimination miserably

damaged the black majority and the privileged white minority. In response to the repression, Ackermann found hope in a small human rights movement, known as The Black Sash, mainly composed of white women who resisted the racist policies of the government through the apartheid era (“Lamenting Tragedy” 218). Adopting tactics centred on the donning of a symbol mourning injustice, they inspired Ackermann’s reflections on lament:

For well nigh forty years the women of the Black Sash engaged in the work of justice, in advice offices in different parts of our country, in acts of civil disobedience, in propagating and monitoring human rights and in protesting waves of racist laws and repressive political actions. Their name was derived from the public wearing of black sashes as a sign of mourning for injustice. The sight of white women standing with their sashes, eyes downcast, at times holding punchy placards, became a familiar sight during the years of the struggle for democracy. This public lament for injustice haunted the lives of the apartheid politicians, a visible demonstration of (one of a few) pockets of white resistance to racist policies (218).

When the oppressive system was finally overturned, the TRC resulted in fragments of revelation of generational trauma and pain inflicted by an oppressive regime. Disclosures and confessions revealed a glimpse of the massive injury caused during the era of the apartheid system, yet the work was incomplete. Repeatedly, Ackermann reflected on fragments of the horrific stories shared by survivors at the beginning of several of her writings, retelling the stories of deep pain, anger, courage and broken heartedness. Such personal testimonies formed the backdrop of her cries for lament (“Take up” 133-134; *Tamar’s Cry*, 7; “Lamenting Tragedy” 213; “On Hearing” 47; “Engaging Freedom” 32; “A Voice” 75; “Reconciliation” 50-51).

Ackermann remained unsatisfied with the outcomes of the TRC to create the conditions for transformed people who had truly heard the depth of suffering and action required to lead to national healing (“Lamenting Tragedy” 219). While the victims of apartheid needed time to grieve and express their anguish, anger, and concern for retribution, perpetrators needed pathways out of destructive racist ideologies, including acts of confession, repentance, and restitution. This led Ackermann to conclude the work of the TRC was unfinished, requiring further actions toward justice and reconciliation:

Healing is inseparable from justice-seeking. In a context with a history glutted with blatant injustices, doing justice is an inescapable priority. This raises the vexed question of perpetrators who are applying for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As their atrocities are revealed, the relatives of victims experience afresh the trauma of loss and grief and, not surprisingly for some, feelings of anger and retribution. We are learning that justice is more elusive than we had thought and that the need for justice is, in this case, superseded by political compromise reached in our negotiated transition to democracy...The moral significance of the victims [sic] anger and the desire for retribution should not be trivialized or ignored (219-220).

Ackermann reflected on the legacy of inherent advantage born from structural inequality and white supremacy (“Take up” 137-138). She recognised the unfinished work as an invitation for the faith community. Ackermann felt strongly that the church, like the Black Sash, should be active in spurring accountability, creating space for acknowledgement, repentance, and healing practices to unfold. Such accountability should not be “limited to being faithful only to the values and vision of the community from which one comes...But accountability is ultimately tested in the reality of the well-being of all” (“On Hearing” 50).

Accountability is ground zero in reckoning with a legacy of oppression leading people to lament since accountability requires *awareness* (Ackermann “On Hearing” 50). Ackermann saw the TRC as an exercise to restore a culture of accountability by virtue of the truth being spoken and justice-seeking where human rights abusers were called to account (“A Voice” 91). Societal wounds were exposed at the TRC, but the forum was inadequate to supply long-term processes for healing from the loss and rupture of the social fabric. For Ackermann, the perpetrators of human rights abuses and the recipients of unjust privilege needed further “opportunity to confess and to repent”, while victims needed more space to lament and tell “their stories of terror and pain” (“Lamenting Tragedy” 219).

Ackermann insists, there is more work to be done to create the conditions for transformation and lament serves as a gateway. Lament provides an occasion to raise voices and cries for justice and healing and Ackermann sought to connect her concern to concrete suffering of people on the ground (“Take up” 135). She extended “her profound imagination” concerning lament to the Eucharist in the context of HIV and AIDS and The

Body of Christ (Nadar "Circles" 151-152).<sup>5</sup> The call for lament went beyond personal concern to public engagement with pressing societal issues which would have detrimental implications for the church if left unattended.

## Implications of the Absence of Lament

Before exploring the implications of the loss of lament, it is instructive to consider how the art of lament was curtailed in Western Christianity. As a result of this estrangement, Ackermann and others have identified theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political implications for the church and society.

## The Loss of Lament in Western Christianity

Ackermann bemoans that "Western Christianity has lost its ability to lament" ("A Voice" 96). The disappearance of individual and communal lament appears to have resulted from a several interrelated issues, such as cultural norms of behaviour, concern for the maintenance of power and control, history, politics, gender, and theology (Ackermann "Take up" 145). Ackermann proposes lament may be foreign to modern Christians partly due to the influence of Greek Stoicism, which advocates for the bearing of suffering without complaining or lamenting ("On Hearing" 54).

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann attributes the loss of lament to the "self-confidence of the Enlightenment" (*Disruptive Grace*, loc 2425). It seemed Western Christianity became uninterested in the laments of the book of Psalms, even interpreting such voices as nonsensical. The result was "removing most Psalms of lament from the lectionary and the liturgy" in the modern church apart from Good Friday (*Disruptive Grace*, loc 2427). "Theological certitude plus cultural self-sufficiency together caused a disregard of one-third of the Psalter" (*Disruptive Grace*, loc 2430). Certainty about an all-powerful, all-knowing God who is in control of all

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<sup>5</sup> Ackermann draws attention to unity with Christ in the Eucharist, emphasizing when one suffers, all suffer, therefore the Body of Christ has HIV/AIDS requiring grace and neighbour care (Ackermann "Tamar's Cry" 314-316). Also, see, "Engaging Stigma: An Embodied Theological Response to HIV and AIDS Pandemic" (Ackermann, 385-395).

things appears to clash with a worshiper who questions and is unhappy about life.

Lament has largely been dismissed as a church practice, although untimely death due to grave. Ackermann implicates churches of the reformation, which have been suspicious of public and private penitential rites, leaving little space for the expression of lament (“Take up” 145). Many churches in South Africa are steeped in the reformed tradition. Reformers historically appeared to be defensive against rituals which might be perceived as authoritarian, magic, or leading to or relating to the expression of emotions that might get out of control (Ackermann “Take up” 145). This inquisitorial stance led to a rejection of rituals perceived to take away from the message of the resurrected Christ by too much focus on suffering, supporting a non-participatory sedate manner of worship (Ackermann “Take up” 146).

Instead of ritual, the interpretation of the Scriptures and understanding of an omnipotent God was deemed the focus of true worship, limiting the expression of emotion (Ackermann “Take up” 145-146). For mainline and contemporary churches, lament may have been displaced by heads “buried in excessive ritual and inept liberal and traditional theologies” or “a gospel of prosperity, triumphalism and positive thinking” (Ackermann “Take up” 146). In such worship traditions, the realities of suffering and injustice can be ignored.

There are important pieces missing when there is little room for lament in contemporary expressions of Western Christianity. Stoic acceptance of the *status quo* and curtailing expressions of emotion stifle lament. Ackermann decries such a loss as having “theological, liturgical, pastoral and political implications” in the context of South Africa, restricting the church’s “role in the search for healing” (Ackermann “Take up” 146). Western Christianity remains a dominant force in South African society influencing theological reflection, ecclesial practices, and even political expressions. What follows is a brief look at some the implications of the loss of lament in these four significant areas.

## Theological Implications

What happens when a theology of lament is absent? Theological reflection without lament fails to encompass the wholeness of the human experience. Historically in Israel’s tradition, people refused to settle for

things as they were, beseeching God to transform intolerable circumstances as part of the covenant (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 226). Ackermann insists, "This is bold and risky theology but it is one which holds restlessness and hope, protest and praise in tension" (226).

Today we live in a world of displaced people, war, devastated communities, poverty, and abuse, which amplify questions about God's justice, presence, reliability, and power in a suffering world (Ackermann "Take up" 146). Without lament, how can people of faith understand God in the totality of their life experience? Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor suggests the book of Lamentations expresses "pain, fury, and despair in an intense struggle for life", providing a comforting witness (loc 141). While honouring voices of pain, loss, and despair, lament "mirrors pain back to those who suffer and, in the process brings them out of isolation into community, even if only briefly" (loc 145).

There is much cause for lament, yet without it, questions about evil in the world and theodicy will be stifled (Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 104). Instead, as Ackermann suggests, we settle for a God who is covered with a sugar-coated veneer of religious optimism whose "omnipotence will 'make everything right in the end'" ("Reconciliation" 62). Brueggemann warns of dire consequences of the loss of the lament Psalms as a viable source of inspiration in the functioning cannon of the church:

In that loss, we may unwittingly endorse a "False Self" that can take no initiative toward an omnipotent God. We may also unwittingly endorse unjust systems about which no questions can properly be raised. In the absence of lament, we may be engaged in uncritical history-stifling praise. Both *psychological inauthenticity* and *social immobility* may be derived from the loss of these texts. If we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these texts is urgent. (*The Psalms*, 111)

Theological reflection without lament remains shallow, limiting the expression of personal and communal faith. Thus, the loss of lament is costly to personal and communal faith resulting in a loss of *genuine covenant interaction* (Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 102). Ackermann insists this is a God whom we dare not approach with our genuine grief and with whom we are in a relationship of internal infantilism (Ackermann "Take up" 146). Such religious optimism prefers to sanitise God by removing God from the ugliness of evil, suffering, and justice, only reflecting a theology for the powerful.

## Liturgical Implications

What happens when people engage in individual and corporate worship without lament? Concerns for justice can become a casualty in church worship. The absence of lament in liturgical use limits access to God regarding concerns for justice. “When the lament form is censured, justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate...the throne seems to be only a place of praise” (Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 107). For Ackermann, the continual focus on positive adoration impoverishes liturgies. In contrast, praise born from lament is hard won through “grappling with injustice and suffering” (Ackermann “Take up” 147). The articulation of profound doubt about God’s presence in a world of suffering, wrestling with unanswered questions, and assaulting “divine silence with tears, petition and then praise, can birth worship “out of the depths” (147).

In addition, Ackermann suggests the lack of room for lament in worship may emanate from a disdain for the physical body in which we encounter God, indicative of Western Christianity (“Take up” 147). She suggests sombre hymns from another era and continent restrict the expression of embodied lament or exuberant praise (“Take up” 147). It may even have something to do with “male-dominated church structures and liturgies which have traditionally been unfriendly to change initiated by women” (Ackermann “On Hearing” 55). *Ritual hostility* toward the body in Western Christianity prevents people from worshipping with their whole bodies:

We encounter God in the body. If the body, whether a joyous, dancing body or a weeping, crushed body is denied the liturgical space to be authentic in the moment, our encounter with God is either limited to being expressed privately or to less than truthful public worship. (Ackermann “Take up” 147)

Womanist scholar, Emile Townes, declares, “everything we do is mediated by our bodies,” but conventional Christian theological formation has left us with a “body-spirit fracture” (136). As a result, this negative dualism separating the evil body and the transcendent spirit has left the Christian community in a dilemma when addressing matters of justice (136). The deficit of embodied lament in liturgical spaces translates to a regrettable distance from the community’s suffering and lived reality.

## Pastoral Implications

What happens when lament is absent in pastoral care? Personal and societal trauma remain unaddressed. For Ackermann, South Africa still needs healing from the deep-seated wounds that remain repressed yet bleed out in horrific ways. Ackermann insists,

We need healing from the terrible wounds of racist and sexist practices. Healing cannot take place if the wounding is denied. Lament spells out the present condition unambivalently. Painful memories cannot be healed if they are suppressed. ("Take up" 148)

The repression and privatisation of pain limits pathways to meaningful pastoral care. Lament carries the ability to call up memories and vocalise them in communities of faith. As a result, "The locus of pain is shifted from the inner world of private suffering to the outer reality of the community of faith in a movement which is potentially cathartic" ("Take up" 148). Experiences of past traumas can lead to depression, but lament allows for grief and tears to counter numbness towards human suffering. Thus, "the loss of lament enfeebles the pastoral care of the church" (148). There remains a pastoral need for individuals to bear witness to unresolved offences so that there is a communal hearing and sharing, which may lead to a measure of healing for victims. According to Ackermann, voicing and acknowledging pain and feelings of vengeance can be seen as an important step for those who may feel powerless ("Reconciliation" 61). Lament may be about past events, but it can address the needs of the present moment, carrying weight for the future. In acknowledging the brokenness of the present linked to past injustice, mourning and healing can happen, and new relationships become possible in the future (61).

## Political Implications

How does a loss of lament affect the witness of the community of faith in the political realm? Ackermann's deliberations about the deficiencies of the TRC show a gap in addressing the legacy of apartheid which was never adequately pursued by the church. Globally, legacies of political and economic empires rooted in colonialism, allowed powerful nations to leave behind conditions which decayed into wars, the deterioration of the environment, immeasurable human suffering, and continuous economic international exploitation. For Ackermann, the practice of lament

speaks to the credibility of the church, “which claims to be a home to the homeless, a voice to the voiceless, and the hope of the hopeless” (“Take up” 148). Brueggemann registers the cry of lament as the catalyst which “energizes the Exodus narrative” and “mobilizes Yahweh to action that begins the history of Israel” (Exodus 2:23-25) (*The Psalms*, 106).

During the years of the political struggle for freedom, black funerals erupted into “highly politicized occasions for expressing opposition to white minority rule.” They also provided a “momentary outlet for the grief and anger of the oppressed (Ackermann “Lamenting Tragedy” 218). Expressions of communal lament can serve to make visible questions of justice and “have the legitimacy to challenge political and economic structures which are unjust and oppressive” (Ackermann “Take up” 148).

Although lament is expressed communally, it comes from individual hearts which are weeping and raging, seeking a response from God. The very nature of lament is profoundly spiritual and profoundly political. Remorse, anger, the need for accountability and justice, combine as we contend with God. (Ackermann “A Voice” 96).

Continued lamentable conditions for the Black majority of South Africa should be challenged and changed, although “lamenting can be politically subversive and therefore dangerous” (Ackermann “Take up” 148). In focusing on lament, Ackermann calls the church to cry out, take up a taunt song or weep with Rachel. This represents a break from the *status quo* joining the majority of South Africans who are living under the weight of grave conditions of continuous deprivation.

## The Call for Public Lament

In the aftermath of the TRC, Ackermann called for public liturgical acts of lament “in the interest of healing and reconciliation” (“Lamenting Tragedy” 218). Her multi-layered deliberations on the subject of lament and the potential for faith communities to play a role in national healing emanated from her reflections on the commission. She challenged the beneficiaries of the apartheid system to change their way of thinking:

So why lament now? Indeed, some of us have over the years lamented the tragic consequences of apartheid. Now, however, in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the time is ripe for public liturgical acts in the interest of healing and reconciliation. The starting point for us is simply this: we shall have to confess and to lament our

unwillingness to deal lovingly with neighbours who are different. Too often we stigmatize the other and thus refuse to be in relationship with her or him.<sup>6</sup> (218)

Racial divisions inscribed during apartheid continue to mark social relations in South Africa. Acknowledging the cry for justice left unfulfilled in the wake of political compromise to ensure a peaceful transition, Ackermann boldly proposes public acts of lament as an opening to better human relations:

I want to suggest that *public lament* for the injustice and the torments of the past is a potentially healing way of responding to the past. By stressing the *public* nature of lament, I am suggesting that such lament should be expressed communally as a liturgical act. It will have to be preceded by *public acts of repentance*. ("Lamenting Tragedy" 231).

Ackermann's call for structured public lament could lead to transformative action wrestling with the conflict and trauma of our time. "It [lament] instinctively creates a link between healing and mourning that makes new just relationships possible in the future" (*Tamar's Cry*, 33). It can be seen as a subversive forum to challenge the powers that be and God, advocating for just change:

Lamenting is risky because it calls into question structures of power, it calls for justice, it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with one another and with God beyond the limits of acceptability. It is a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act (*Tamar's Cry*, 33).

Thus, public lament is about encounter with God and engagement with broken human relations. It is "both an individual and a communal act" with present and future dimensions where "human relationships have gone awry" (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 220):

Lament should be generous not grudging, explicit, not generalized, unafraid to contain petitions and confident that they will be heard. Above

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<sup>6</sup> In using the terminology of *the other*, Ackermann sought to describe human perceptions of difference and problematise how these perceptions plague humanity. "To speak of the other, is to speak of space, boundaries, time, difference, our bodies, cultures, traditions, ideologies and beliefs" ("Lamenting Tragedy" 216). Also see, "*Becoming Fully Human: An Ethic of Relationship in Difference and Otherness*" (13-27).

all lament is never for a purpose. It is never utilitarian. Lament is an existential wail which comes from the depths of the human soul. (220-221)

The content of lament cannot be prescribed, yet it requires mindful engagement of the heart and spirit in active hope.

Ackermann often advocates for the importance of storytelling, narrative and dialogue stimulated amongst people in relationships with one another (Nadar “Circles” 149).

I suggest that public lament starts with the voices of women and marginalized and of oppressed people telling their stories, probably in small groups, daring to rage and wrangle with God, questioning doctrines of faith that glorify suffering, resisting further pain and calling on God to act, forgive or restore. These stories can be followed by acts of repentance and, when appropriate, forgiveness and reconciliation. (Ackermann “Take up” 149)

Ackermann importantly qualifies that processes of forgiveness and reconciliation can neither be expected or rushed. To hurry the expectation of forgiveness and reconciliation too quickly is likened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *cheap grace*, expecting forgiveness without repentance (Ackermann “A Voice” 92). Therefore, “lamenting does not seek premature forgiveness” (Ackermann “Take up” 149). Translating acts of public lament into liturgies, both victims and perpetrators can raise their voices within the worship service. Ackermann urges “such acts have the potential to introduce a new and healing language into our spiritual and political arenas” (149).

## Lament: A Language for Our Times<sup>7</sup>

The expression of Western Christianity in South Africa has suppressed voices of despair in favour of triumphant praise. The continued lived experience of the majority of South Africans, replete with suffering and injustice, begs the church to create safe spaces for people to give voice to lament. People need room for theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political expressions of lament to foster a more just society. This can happen more intentionally through the public telling and hearing of stories:

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<sup>7</sup> On 7 September 2004, Ackermann gave a talk entitled, “Lament: A Language for Our Times” at the Centre of Christian Spirituality.

Telling our stories, hearing the stories of others, allows our stories to intersect. Sometimes they conflict, accuse and even diverge greatly; sometimes they attract, connect and confirm. As our stories touch one another, they change, and we too are changed. (Ackermann "Becoming Fully Human" 24)

In my research journey exploring a praxis-based approach to liberating theological education in the city of Cape Town, lament emerged as a faith practice which was "a way to identify and hold individual and communal woundedness" (Headley, 326). Various participants engaged in action and reflection in urban contexts reported the ways lament helped to humanise broken spaces "leading to fresh forms of resistance" (370). Ackermann describes a range of contexts and emotions where lament is practical for the faith community:

To lament psychologically, culturally, socially as people of faith because of pain, loss, shame, guilt, disillusionment and disenchantment, is at the core of the contemporary struggle to forge new meaning in contemporary South Africa out of the legacies of the past. ("Take up" 149)

Though often speaking to the South African context, Ackermann acknowledges there are global crises creating a "universal need for healing":

Wars, rape, plunder, displacement of people, famine, poverty, the systemic rape of the environment, these and more are the realities of the late twentieth century. We live in a broken world in need of repair. (Ackermann "Take up" 137).

Hers is a cry of lament leading to action, and resistance, embracing liberating praxis towards healing.

Recovering the practice of lament holds promise. It allows us to enter individual stories of pain, torture, and trauma, and it is necessarily a communal practice for our times. Ackermann has sought to call the Body of Christ and academia to come to the margins at the crossroads of multiple offenses and oppressions in broken contexts (Nadar "Circles" 150). Ackermann insists, Lament is forged from the disproportionate suffering of the marginalised, with particular sensitivity to the plight of the victims of apartheid, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the poor, which too often prevail on the shoulders of women (Ackermann "Take up" 150).

The practice of lament causes us to attend to the broken body of Christ, sharing in the sufferings of those who are contending with God for consolation and justice. Ackermann calls for attentiveness to the brokenness of society and solidarity with communities facing constant cycles of abuse

and degradation in the face of death-dealing systems. She calls the church to face deep wounds created from legacies of discrimination, dispossession, oppression and stigma:

The church which recovers the tradition and the vocabulary of lament will discover that it can express contemporary political, cultural and religious concerns very powerfully in its prayer, its liturgical rites and, above all in the celebration of communion (Ackermann, *Take up a Taunt*, 149).

Ackermann's reflections on lament may open pathways towards communal healing in a traumatising world. "Genuine lament guides us into a life-giving openness to the possibilities" instead of being stuck in the today and tomorrow of "narcotic selfishness and disinterest" (Townes 146). Lament has the power to break cycles of denial, amnesia, apathy, paralysis, and self-interest. Lament has the power to press people toward accountability, resistance, and the courage to act in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and injustice.

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## 13 | Unshackling Bible Translations from Colonial Chains: Theologising with Dora Mbuwayesango in the Diaspora

*Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo*

### Abstract

Undeniably one of the leading female gurus whose academic prowess goes down the annals of history in the field of Old Testament Studies and Biblical hermeneutics, Dora Mbuwayesango is an established academic and a theologian, and in particular, a biblical scholar par excellence. Using document analysis, this chapter explores selected writings of Mbuwayesango focusing on her expertise in biblical hermeneutics. The chapter pays particular attention to Mbuwayesango's engagement with African biblical translations and their Godslaughter which led to the gendering of African deities, the usurpation of African indigenous religion giving rise to patriarchal ideologies and the subservience of the African woman and this became deeply entrenched in African religio-cultural beliefs. The chapter concludes with not only exploring the works of Mbuwayesango, but highlights her endeavour to unshackle colonial chains through (i) adopting a postcolonial feminist approach to biblical hermeneutics, (ii) lobbying for the recovery of indigenous meanings of African languages, (iii) lobbying for interdisciplinary Bible translations and the (iv) decolonisation of the gods of Africa from the colonial heist.

**Keywords:** Mbuwayesango, biblical hermeneutics, Bible translation, *Mwari*, patriarchy, Shona

### Introduction

Undeniably one of the leading female gurus whose academic prowess goes down the annals of history in the field of Old Testament Studies and Biblical hermeneutics, Dora Mbuwayesango is an established academic

and a theologian, and in particular, a biblical scholar par excellence. Besides having residence that spans over decades in the diaspora, Mbuwayesango remains a staunch academic of African scholarship. This is evidenced in her continuing engagement with contemporary social issues bedevilling the African context. Therefore, in honour of Mbuwayesango's remarkable contribution to biblical scholarship, this article focuses on one of her major research focus areas which is the problem of colonial Bible translation in Africa. In her writings, Mbuwayesango (2020; 2001) depicts how the translation of the Christian Bible into African vernacular languages is convolutedly related to the colonial conquest of Africa which was calculatedly aimed at dispossessing the African people of their culture, traditions and resources. She contends that to date, Bible translators still endeavour to 'religiously and culturally' colonize Africa while contributing to the marginalization of African women (Mbuwayesango 2020).

In responding to the mandate of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle) which seeks to empower women as well as promoting gender equality in religion and society, Mbuwayesango uses research and publication to unravel challenges bedevilling the African people, and in particular, African women. The matriarch's engagement with the challenge of colonial biblical translations in Africa exposes how biblical translations contributed to the marginalization of women in Africa. As a way of redressing the effects of the colonial onslaught of African cultures through Bible translation, Mbuwayesango offers alternative ways of redressing the anomalies of colonial biblical translations and their destructive effects in Africa. This writing begins with Mbuwayesango's biography. It pays attention to her educational qualifications, publications and academic expertise and highlights selected publications which are by no means exhaustive. The main thrust of this writing is a focus on Mbuwayesango's engagement with African biblical translation and how this relates to the mandate of the Circle which centres on promoting the wellness and liberation of African women.

## **Biography of Dora Mbuwayesango**

Mbuwayesango is currently a George and Iris Battle professor of Hebrew or Old Testament and Languages at Hood Theological Seminary, Salis-

bury, NC. She joined the faculty of Hood in 1995, holding the first professional chair since 2011. Mbuwayesango is a holder of the esteemed position of Dean of Students, a position she has meticulously held since 2007. She is a co-founder of the African Biblical Hermeneutics section in the Society of Biblical Literature and has both served and chaired its Steering Committee. She is a member of the Anglican and International Peace with Justice Concerns where she also served on the Steering Committee from 2012 to 2018. Mbuwayesango has also served on the Board of Rowan Helping Ministries where she currently serves on the Board of Rape, Child and Family Abuse Crisis Council of Salisbury-Rowan, Inc. She is a member of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars and serves on its Steering Committee.

## Education, Publications and Academic Expertise

Mbuwayesango holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Religion from Emory University, United States of America (1998); A Master's degree in Biblical studies obtained from Harvard Divinity School (1990) and a Bachelor of Arts Honors degree in Religious Studies obtained from the University of Zimbabwe, (1986, 1987). In terms of research and publication, Mbuwayesango has published extensively in numerous academic journals, edited volumes as well as editing a number of collections. Her research areas mainly centre on Hebrew/Old Testament studies, the Torah/Pentateuch and the prophets, sexuality in the Hebrew Bible, Postcolonial interpretations of biblical scriptures, Womanist/Feminist biblical interpretations, and the discourse of HIV and AIDS. Whilst Mbuwayesango holds a considerable volume of publications to her credit, she has also extensively collaborated with other theologians in various publications.

## Dora Mbuwayesango's Selected List of Publications

- “The Challenge of Feminist Bible Translations in African Contexts” in Susanne Scholz (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, 2020.
- “Feminist Biblical Studies in Africa” in *Feminist Bible Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza; Society of Biblical Literature, 2014).

- *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Hermeneutics* (co-editor with Musa W. Dube and Andrew Mbuvi) Society of Biblical Literature, 2012.
- “Canaanite Women and Israelite Women in Deuteronomy: The Intersection of Sexism and Imperialism” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah* (ed. Tatsiong Benny Liew; Sheffield Phoenix Press, November 2009).
- “Zephaniah” in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (gen. ed. Hugh R. Page, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).
- “Dialogical Beginnings, A Conversation on the Future of Feminist Biblical studies” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (with Susanne Scholz) 25(2), Fall 2009, 93-103.
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- “Joshua” in *Global Bible Commentary* (Daniel Patte, editor, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).
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- “Childlessness and Woman-to-Woman Relationships in Genesis and in African Patriarchal Society: Sarah and Hagar from a Zimbabwean Woman’s Perspective (Gen 16:1-16; 21:8-12)”, in *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (ed. Phyllis Bird, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 27-36.
- “The Circle’s Contribution to HIV Discourse on the Global Level” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28(2), 145-147.
- “Bible Translation in the Colonial Project in Africa and its Impact on African Languages and Cultures” in R.S. Sugirtharaja (ed). *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Criticism*.

## Committees and Religious Affiliation

Mbuwayesango is a member of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars and has served on its steering committee. She is also a member and serves in the steering committee of the Chicago Consultation and also sits on the Advisory Board of the Old Testament Essays: An Old Testament Theological Journal that is accredited by the Department of Education in South Africa. Mbuwayesango is an Anglican/Episcopalian and is actively involved in the life of the church. She is a member of the St Luke's Episcopal where she has served on the vestry between the year 2011 and 2013. She was appointed by the Head of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church to serve on its Standing Committee on Anglican and International Peace with Justice Concerns (2012-2018).

## Methodology

The chapter used document analysis to reflect on the writings of Mbuwayesango and her contribution to the mandate of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle). Document analysis represents a systematic procedure that is adopted for reviewing documents in the form of print or electronic (Bowen 2009). This is a form of qualitative research whereby data is examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning and to gain further understanding (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The process of analysis included skimming, reading and interpreting selected writings of Mbuwayesango.

## Engaging Mbuwayesango and her publications

In her publication (*African Biblical Translations: A Case Study of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (2006), Mbuwayesango (2006) discusses how, prior to the British colonization of Zimbabwe in 1980, the country comprised of differing religio-political entities. These religio-political entities were united by the Supreme Being of the Shona personally known as *Mwari*. The Shona deity, *Mwari*, was known as a genderless spirit being, representing both the male and the female characters (Mbuwayesango 2006). The historical Shona deity, *Mwari*, had varied attributes dependent upon *Mwari's* transcendence and creative works. Accordingly, as articulated by Mbuwayesango (2006), *Mwari* is also referred to as *Nyadenga* (of the sky); *Mutangakugara* (first to exist); *Muumbi* (one who forms); and

*Musikavanhu* (creator of humanity). These differing but specific conceptualisations of *Mwari* represented the Shona religious and traditions understanding of their deity. Such conceptualisation, as highlighted by Mbuwayesango, was usurped by the Christian God. The Shona people could no longer relate to the varying creative activities of their deity, but had to conform to *Mwari* of the Bible. Gwaambuka (2019) speaks of the grand spiritual heist in reference to ‘how Christianity stole and slaughtered African gods’. Alluding to similar sentiments expressed by Mbuwayesango, Gwaambuka (2019) posit that Bible translators adopted the names of African gods as a strategy for making the Christian religion conversant with African religion. He terms such a practice a colonial Godslaughter, a heist in translation and a fraud of epic proportions (Gwaambuka 2019). In this respect, Gwaambuka posits that Africans should not lose hope regarding their gods who have been trapped in the Christian purgatory. As such, reference is drawn to Musa Dube who strongly believes that the pen should be used as the sword to rescue the Shona deity. It is through writing that married the Shona deity with the biblical deity hence it is also through writing that the identification of *Mwari* with the genderless Shona deity can be recovered. It is thus posited that the African gods were lost in translation, hence it is through writing and publication that their reverence and sacredness can be reclaimed. Therefore, Mbuwayesango, through her writings, is unreservedly sharing her contribution to the unshackling of the Shona deity from colonial fetters.

### **The Bible as a Propaganda Tool for Dismantling the Religious Cultural Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe**

The Bible was vastly instrumental in the colonization of Zimbabwe. It is positioned as a *propaganda tool* that led to the colonization of the religious-cultural belief systems of the Shona people (Mbuwayesango 2006). Mbuwayesango (2006) also highlights that the Bible was also used as a text in schools. This was the coloniser’s calculated strategy to inculcate the precepts of the Eurocentric *Mwari* to those who were beginning to read and write. Such a move, as highlighted by Mbuwayesango, was meant to conscientize those learning to read and write a new perception of *Mwari*, one that was divorced from the Shona religious-cultural belief system.

In her article, *How Divine Powers were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona*, Mbuwayesango (2020) unequivocally links the religious colonization of the Shona of Zimbabwe through the colonization of the Shona deity, *Mwari*. The Shona deity was unfairly equated with the biblical deity and the resultant was the consequent transformation of the Shona deity. However, Mbuwayesango (2020) argues there were stringent conditions associated with reverence and allegiance to the biblical-associated *Mwari*. It meant the Shona has to renounce their own identity and conform to Western notions of the biblical God. Resultantly, the Shona religious traditions were deemed incompatible with *Mwari* therefore the Shona people had to adopt to the new precepts related to the biblical deity.

In her writings, Mbuwayesango (2020; 2006) clearly demonstrates the power of the written word as evidenced by the Bible which calculatedly repressed African oral traditions. As a result, the biblical word was considered more authentic than the oral traditions that it usurped. Historically, the Shona belief systems were passed from one generation to the next through folktales, this oral tradition was repressed and interchanged with the written word. Mbuwayesango rightly obliterates that Shona folktales were regarded as myths and unreal therefore, they were denied the same validity as the Bible (2006).

### **Mbuwayesango and Advocating for the ‘Unshackling Mwari from Colonial Chains’**

Having rightly acknowledged the dire and destructive effects of the Bible on the Shona deity, Mbuwayesango advocates for the unshackling of *Mwari* from colonial chains. She posits that “while the past cannot be undone, it is crucial now that the translation of the Shona Bible be done independent of the evangelization of the Shona” (2006:266). For that reason, Mbuwayesango argues that to redress the anomaly raised in translating the Bible from English to Shona, there is need to directly use Hebrew and Greek texts. Furthermore, Mbuwayesango suggests the need for a Hebrew-Shona dictionary as well as a Greek-Shona dictionary. This would enable the Shona to read and understand the Bible based on its original texts of Hebrew and Greek. In this regard, Mbuwayesango (2006) also makes reference to the writing of Canaan Banana (1995), the late Zimbabwean theologian and political leader, who, apart from lobbying for the re-translation of the Bible in original languages, also lobbied for

the rewriting of the Bible. Such a move, as argued by Banana, would ensure the inclusion of some words that were omitted from the biblical texts (Mbuwayesango 2006). Whilst Banana's (1995) assumptions position the Christian and the Shona deity at par, Mbuwayesango (2006) posits the distinctive nature of the two gods should be maintained. As such, it is Mbuwayesango's contention that there should be separate documents that contain Shona stories and traditions in relation to their deity (2006). In this regard, Mbuwayesango suggests that Hebrew names of God should be maintained so as to enable a distinction between *Mwari* and *Yhwh Elohim* (2001). It is therefore, Mbuwayesango's argument that Shona traditions must not be legitimated on the basis of the Bible, but should be taken as authentic on their own.

Mbuwayesango's analogy of the importance of using the written word to subdue oppressive structures succinctly augurs well with the mandate of the Circle which is centred on research and publication. In her writings, Mbuwayesango reflects how African culture was dismantled through the pen, and in particular, through biblical translations. Mbuwayesango therefore argues "writing merged *Mwari* with the biblical god and it is through writing that the identification of *Mwari* with the genderless Shona deity will be reclaimed" (2006:267). This therefore is an intimate call for all Circle theologians, including male friends of the Circle, to use the pen as the sword for fighting against colonial conquests that are still stifling the African people. Mbuwayesango calls for the pen to be positioned as the sword for liberating Africa.

### **Engaging Mbuwayesango and her Publication on 'The Challenge of Feminist Bible Translations in African Contexts' (2020)**

In this publication, Mbuwayesango (2020) interrogates how Bible translations by missionaries misconstrued African cultures and religions. Using the Shona people as a case study, Mbuwayesango (2020) contends that the inclusion of the Shona God, *Mwari* in the Bible subjected the Shona deity to foreign patriarchal notions previously alien to the Shona culture. Whilst the historical Shona God was genderless, the biblical *Mwari* gave rise to notions of gender and sexuality which subsequently led to the subjugation of women as well as instigating homophobic tendencies (Mbuwayesango 2020). This writing points out that western missionaries came up with colonial translations that condemned African

cultures, and positioned western patriarchal ideology as an intrinsic part of biblical instruction (Mbuwayesango 2020). As a result, these biblical translations gave rise to sexist domination and marginalisation of African women, and this became embedded in their indigenous cultures. Mbuwayesango (2020) argues that:

Explicit and implicit sexist translations in African Bibles have led to African women's exclusion and marginalization are still part of the many official translation projects in many African contexts because most African Bible translation projects are still male dominated.

In this regard, Mbuwayesango (2020) posits that such biblical translations disregard challenges bedevilling women as a result of androcentric semantics and patriarchal imaginings leading to the subjugation of women. This unfortunate situation is aggravated by the exclusion of women as Bible translators thereby perpetuating the continued dominance of women. Through her writing and engagement with biblical translations, Mbuwayesango (2020; 2001) highlights the double jeopardy and oppressive plight of African women. In responding to the mandate of the Circle, Mbuwayesango uses the pen as the sword aimed at disarming the bias in biblical translation, but instead, calls for Bible translators to redress the sexist and patriarchal connotations that have continued to be part and parcel of Bible translation even in postcolonial Africa. She makes an intimate call for Bible translators in the African context to desist from espousing patriarchal insinuations which consequently lead to the subjugation of women in basically all spheres of life which are the political, economic, social and religious (Mbuwayesango 2020).

Not only did western notions of biblical translations give rise to the subjugation of African women, they also brought about the marginalisation of African culture and religion, stripping away the dignity of the African people and dispossessing them from their ancestral lands. Mbuwayesango (2020) contends that the translation of the Christian Bible into African languages is convolutedly linked to the colonial agenda of conquering the African continent and robbing her of her indigenous cultures and resources that give her wealth. As such, Mbuwayesango (2020) attests that missionaries triumphed in converting the African people to a Christianity that was emblematic to Western practice. Furthermore, as a strategy to subdue African religion and culture, Mbuwayesango (2020) posits that the missionaries adopted the names of African deities for the biblical God. As such, this strategy resulted in the suppression of African

local deities which were replaced by the western biblical deities. This ultimately meant that the African people had to conform to the Western religious practices associated with the biblical deities. As a result, the sacred nature and reverence paid to African deities was replaced by the Western deities, masked in African languages. Indigenous ceremonies and rituals for African deities were regarded as heathen and were replaced by Western Christian rituals and ceremonies thereby leading to the disintegration of African indigenous religion. Hence the need to be wary of continuing to feed into the colonial agenda of religiously and culturally subduing Africa that is enabled through Bible translations.

### **The Gendering of the Shona God in the Colonial Translations**

Before the colonial biblical translation, the Shona, according to their indigenous religion, conceptualised their deity, *Mwari*, as genderless and a spiritual reality (Mbuwayesango 2020). Mbuwayesango (2020) further contends that the colonisation of the Shona deity through biblical translation converted the deity to a tangible and gendered male form. This also resulted in the gendering of Shona vocabulary, for example, the male human (Adam) in the Bible was linked with the Shona '*munhu*' (a person, either male or female) and was translated to represent humanity. This ultimately created new western forms of gender ideologies that were in contrast with Shona indigenous religio-cultural conceptualisations. Such a move created gender binaries that gave rise to the subordination of women. This was contrary to the original Shona indigenous religion and culture as expressed by Mbuwayesango (2020) that historically in pre-colonial Africa, there were fluid gender systems as well as gender-bending practices that permitted the interchanging roles, functions, and power systems of both sexes. This is also alluded to by Oduyoye (2001:42) who postulated that:

Most of Africa has no images of God, so where there are no gender specific pronouns it has been insisted that God is supra-gender. It is also asserted that the God that created males created females, gave both the same spirit and called both human. What is central to our humanity, therefore is that both female and male are akin to God having received the same divine spirit. Gender does not define our worthiness, because it is not present in god. For this reason in the theological writings of African women, the gender of God plays a marginal role.

This therefore calls for people of African descent to reimagine their own historic conceptualisations of the deity, devoid of foreign misconceptions. Biblical inerrancy and infallibility make the Bible sacred and this is also used to defend patriarchy (Mojola 2018). In most African religious contexts, the Bible is revered and taken as sacred thereby perpetuating a patriarchal ideology that became embedded in the religio-culture of the African people. Mbuwayesango (2020) highlights that the translation of Genesis 2:4b-25 assigns a subordinate position to women as well as introducing the culture of heteronormativity within the Shona culture. As such, this presented heterosexuality as the only acceptable expression of sexuality, thereby instituting male autonomy and associated privileges of lording over women's sexuality. In the article, *African Biblical Translations: A Case Study of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (2006), Mbuwayesango points out that the historical *Mwari* did not discriminate but spoke through both sexes as well as objects. This indicates God is neither male nor female, hence to assign God a gender is tantamount to idolatry as god cannot be equated with mankind but is spirit (Mojola 2018). However, the gendering of God in biblical translations emanates from the challenge of translatability. Mojola (2018) argues that Bible translators grapple with the question of how to translate the name of God in vernacular languages as they face the challenge of determining the nature and gender of God. He points out that in biblical scripture, God is known as the father which actually contradicts other indigenous cultures that perceive God as female (Mojola 2018). As such, Mbuwayesango calls for the need to remedy the challenge of what translates to androcentric and sexist language in biblical scripture.

## Remedying the Transgressions of the Colonial Past

In an attempt to remedy the transgressions of the colonial past, Mbuwayesango (2020) proposes some basic tenets that can also be adopted.

**Firstly**, Mbuwayesango (2020) lobbies for the application of a postcolonial feminist approach to Bible translation as an alternative way to decolonise and depatriarchalise Bible translations and their oppressive and misogynist interpretations in Africa. It has been noted that African women are doubly oppressed as they struggle under the yoke of colonialism and patriarchal oppression (Dube 2020). Hence a postcolonial feminist approach to biblical translation seeks to decolonise hegemonic tendencies that revere the Bible as sacred text under the guise of advancing patriarchy and the subsequent subordination of women. Postcolonial feminist

approaches to Bible translation therefore pays attention to the socio-cultural context as well as other factors instigated by colonialism and patriarchy to subdue women, particularly those in the third world.

**Secondly**, Mbuwayesango also calls for the recovery of indigenous meanings of African languages as an attempt to remedy the transgressions of the colonial past. Currently, there has been incessant calls for the preservation, revitalizing and promotion of African languages across the continent. During a two-day regional consultation in preparation for the Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 held on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2021, the African Union expressed that “the AU recognises that the cultural emancipation of the African depends on their effective use of languages”. Therefore, preserving indigenous languages reaffirms our African identity as language is attached to a people’s way of life. Mbuwayesango’s call for the restoration of indigenous meanings of African languages, particularly in biblical translation, represents the remedying of colonial translations that were taken out of context.

**Thirdly**, Mbuwayesango proposes that Bible translations should be an interdisciplinary endeavour at institutions of higher learnings. She further posits that this endeavour should not be solely focused on promoting Christianity but should be an independent and unbiased procedure towards biblical translation. This is because the Bible is considered the most influencing book in the history of mankind and human civilization (Ying 2015). Therefore, an interdisciplinary study of the Bible allows for divergent readings in various fields inclusive of theology, ethics, history etc. Lastly, in all the attempts that can be made to restore the pride of African religion that was subdued through androcentric and biased biblical translations, Mbuwayesango strongly lobbies for the decolonisation of the gods of Africa. This can be enabled by the application of postcolonial biblical interpretations, the recovery of the original meanings of African indigenous languages, particularly in biblical translation, and lastly, through the adoption of interdisciplinary Bible translations.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on Mbuwayesango, an esteemed African academic and one of the long-standing members of the Circle. The chapter highlighted Mbuwayesango's biography, paying attention to her educational and professional accolades as well as her community engagement initiatives. Drawing from Mbuwayesango's selected publications, the chapter focused on the challenge of biblical translation in African settings. Mbuwayesango's selected publications reflected the anomaly arising from imperial and hegemonic biblical translations that misrepresented the African conceptualisation of God and also gave rise to patriarchal practices that led to the subordination of African women. Mbuwayesango's publications respond to the mandate of the Circle which strives to proffer theological and ethical reflections that empower and transform oppressive situations for men, and in particular, women who are doubly affected by both colonialism and patriarchal tendencies that subjugate their status.

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## 14 | Theologizing in her Name with Susan Rakoczy

*Eze Chika*

### Abstract

Susan Rakoczy is an emerita professor of systematic theology and spirituality at St. Joseph's Theological Institute and the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Although, she is American, she has lived many years in Africa, specifically in Ghana and South Africa. She has been an academic of high reputation, who has contributed great insight towards women doing theology, popularly reflected in the book she authored in 2004 titled: *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*. The book among many other things provides in-depth discussion regarding origins and development of feminist theology and its interpretations in Africa and other continents. Therefore, this chapter reflects Professor Rakoczy's thematic analysis of women's trusting experience, which she presents as the core of feminist theology and spirituality. Accordingly, the engagement in this chapter features her analysis of how African women (including women across the globe) despite their experience of frustration in the face of patriarchy strive to flourish. In this context, the victory that African women achieve through trusting God and their experience to overcome the insidious links between patriarchy, violence and Christianity is made vivid, particularly in presenting the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa. Hence, the chapter relates women's trusting experience to African feminist liberation theology, emphasizing the essential role women play in affirming/defining 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming'. In summary, it can be affirmed that Professor Rakoczy presents African woman as one who surmounts any experience of limitations presented to her via Christianity and traditional religion.

**Keywords:** Feminist theology and spirituality, Trusting experience, African Feminist liberation theology, African women, Patriarchy, Violence and Christianity

## Introduction

Professor Rakoczy's contribution to feminist theology is much captured in her book: *In her name: Women doing theology* wherein among other subthemes; she critically presents the different waves of feminist movement, reflecting a historical analysis of feminist theology as spanning through various eras (Rakoczy 2004). Predominantly, the book signatures the reality that women despite all odds are now actively engaged in the work of theology and their contributions are re-shaping both the traditional and Christian theological framework. In this context, the mere fact that women now do theology include the reality; that women not only do theology but also contribute to theological knowledge creation, which on its own merit portrays an inclusiveness. Hence, women can now enjoy certain levels of equity with male theologians. This is a reality that emerged since the era of feminist consciousness reflecting how women, both individually and collectively sought to question and challenge their rights, roles, and status in pre-modern society (Kierana 2016). Appropriately, women can now contribute to defining 'who they are.'

It is in this perspective, that this chapter singles out Professor Rakoczy's premise on women's trusting experience, which she acclaims enable women to flourish despite all forms of set-backs, limitations and segregation based on gendered identity. This act of women's 'trusting experience' correlates with Oduyoye's (2001) African feminist liberation theology, reflecting women's tireless struggles to define 'who they are' and 'who they ought to be' including 'the demand to be recognized' despite cultural and religious obstacles that cripples their identity and development. Hence, Rakoczy's idea of women doing theology features women as voicing out their position and concern in the contextual background of patriarchy (Oduyoye 2001), which is a global reality that relegates women to the background, denying them the opportunity to pursue all-round development, including academics and otherwise.

Professor Rakoczy's overarching argument is that women across the globe (including African, Asia, Latin American, North America and European women) have embraced the feminist spirituality of trusting in God and in themselves as a strategy for survival. Again, this could be linked to Denis Ackermann's (1998) premise indicating that women's experiences unlike in the past have become relevant; worthy of recognition and study, and inclusion as part of intellectual pursuit. Ackermann's feminist theoretical analysis is associated with the awakening of feminist

consciousness, on which this chapter anchors Professor Rakoczy's dominant argument. In this perspective, women are engaging their own experiences as means of strategizing to define and voice their position of inclusiveness as part of the society they rightly belong to. The broad spectrum of Professor Rakoczy's argument is that Christianity as a patriarchal religion does violence to women through its preponderant presentation of women as inferior to men (Rakoczy 2011). Consequently, she maintains that part of the constraints women encounter is the continuous use of household codes of the New Testament to subordinate women as second to men, thereby set boundaries that women ought to fit in (Rakoczy 2011). Hence, Professor Rakoczy in alliance with African feminist liberation theology asserts that women have grown to overcome traditional and Christian limitations that often hold them (women) back from achieving the peak of any given endeavour through the spirituality of trusting in God and themselves. As such, women despite these limitations push themselves forward to be heard and seen. Professor Rakoczy's premise regarding women's trusting experience is presented within various domains such as: What is feminist spirituality? interpreting experience, diversity of experience and finally in the narrative of an African woman: Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa (20th century), a South African woman who has lived out her trusting experience in herself and in God; and as such never allowed herself to be subdued but rather persevered in surmounting the "fierce opposition and massive obstacles" she encountered (Rakoczy 2011). Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa's narrative is sampled as representing African women's disposition of seeking for deeper meaning within the Christian traditions despite their experiences of opposition (Rakoczy 2011). Rev. Victory's narrative stands as a proof of African woman's resilience and strength of character not to break under any magnitude of suffrage.

## **Feminist Spirituality**

Professor Rakoczy identifies feminist spirituality as an important theme within the framework of feminist theology. She emphasized that feminist spirituality is expressed through the interpretation women ascribe to their daily experiences and trust in God. She defines feminist spirituality as "an approach which seeks and finds God in all the circumstances of life, affirms life and growth in others, works with others to bring a greater fullness of life (wholeness and right relationships) into every situation

and structure of culture and society including the church” (Rakoczy 2004:374). In unpacking this quote, it means that feminist spirituality essentially dwells on perceiving God as part of every experience, which energizes, and infuses in women the strength to face unwinding experiences of life. Based on their trust and experience of God, women are able to liberate themselves. Part of the analysis is the reality that women’s experiences are diverse in nature, including the different experience of African woman, American woman, Asia women, European women among many others. Therefore, there is no one single lens through which women’s trusting experience will be perceived though this chapter focuses on presenting African women’s experience using the theological context of Africa.

Professor Rakoczy has anchored women’s agency of trusting in God and self as facilitating their unprecedented attitude of sustaining peace despite their encounter with gendered violence located within culture and Christianity (Rakoczy 2006:187-207). In her chapter contribution to African women, religion, and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, she articulated how women across the globe including African women have championed the challenge of a non-violent approach to solving life problems. In this perspective, she presented the life narratives of Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day as women who are both pacifists in upholding the spirituality of non-violence in a world dominated by male dominance and war, maleness and self-identification with war, lust and violence. For example, Professor Rakoczy cited Solle (1990), to express how men often take the lead in propagating, emphasizing that violence, war and rape are one. She presents the lives of Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day as striking witness for peace and non-violence. In presenting both women as ‘pacifists’, Rakoczy argues that both women did not only refuse to participate in war but lived a life style that gently oppose policies that violate gospel principles of peace. Hence, their life style challenges all people to reflect on why they support violence (direct/indirect), thus inspire others to daily conversion and change of heart. In exploring women’s engagement with spirituality of non-violence in Africa, she presented two examples of non-violence actions by South African women, which she describes as imitating the life style of Jesus as expressed in the gospel. Accordingly, Rakoczy presents African women as persons who understand, interpret and handle every human experience through God’s lens. An example of such dispositions was captured in the opposition narratives of how South African women (including other women) dealt

with the 'Pass Laws' of 1955, which was meant specifically to be issued to women.

The narrative says that in September 1955, the government announced that passes will soon to be issued to women in South Africa. A month later, the Federation of South African Women organized their first march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest the new law. The protest was led by four women, representing the racial complexity of South Africa: Lilian Ngoyi (African), Helen Joseph (White), Rahima Moosa (Asian), and Sophie Williams (Colored). Although, this initial walk did not stop the government from issuing the pass warrant to women in 1956, but also women across different cities of South Africa did not stop their march until victory was won. The largest and famous march demonstration took place on 9 August 1956 at the Union Building in Pretoria, and the estimated number of women that participated were 20,000 (Rakoczy 2006). It was estimated that this large number of women came from all over the country reflecting active participation of African women as follows:

Many of the African women wore traditional dress, others wore Congress colors, green, black and gold; Indian women were clothed in white saris. Many women had babies on their backs, and some domestic workers brought their white employers' children along with them. Throughout the demonstration, the huge crowd displayed a discipline and a dignity that was deeply impressive (Rakoczy 1982:195).

Women's participation in such protests were indicative of their spirituality of trusting God and self, and to this effect, some of their leaders expressed that they are not afraid and either would they relent until victory is won. For example, Annie Silinga of the ANC Women's League declared that intimidation did not frighten them and that they (women) were prepared to fight the passes until victory was theirs (Walker 1982 in Rakoczy 2006). In this stance, Professor Rakoczy acclaims that African women's feminist spirituality extends to include spirituality of non-violence, portraying wholeness of life, aimed at wellness of life for self and others. She describes such motivation as exemplified in Jesus' mandate in the Gospel expressed in, John: 10:10, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full".

As such women are presented as seeking fullness of life for themselves and others through their spirituality of trusting and interpreting experience. In this perspective, feminist spirituality is linked to an attitude of nourishment that strengthens and boosts resilience, fortifying them with

energy to overcome obstacles and challenges. In other words, feminist spirituality provides safe spaces in which women own and interpret their experiences, which is very much captured in Mercy Oduyoye's African women liberation theology. In affirmation, Amoah (1994) acclaims that African women need such spirituality to sustain fullness of life. In this context, women's interpretation of experience is key to feminist spirituality; it begins with women's act of meaning making; anchored around how women understand, narrate and interpret their stories. Accordingly, Mercy Oduyoye in one of her interviews on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2007 exhibited a typical example of an African women's engagement with spirituality of trust, knowing and resistance as means of making sense of who she is. The incident happened in her first faculty departmental meeting held at the University of Ibadan, when the Dean asked her to make tea for the faculty during the meeting. Hence, she needed to assert herself in the face of such oppressive patrilineal African context, after she got married to her Nigerian husband. In her own expression she stated that, she was stunned by the request, so she got up from her seat, picked up the phone on the professor's table, called the administrative secretary of the department (a man) who is normally in charge of refreshments, and in front of all of the men she said "the professor says the staff is ready for their tea" (Oduyoye interview 2007). She soon realized the men thought it was her responsibility to make the tea. But by calling the person in charge of refreshments, she asserts, "I gave him his job back" (Oduyoye interview 2007). Smartly, she redefined herself, which could be understood as liberating herself otherwise, she could have allowed herself to accept the subservient position.

Mercy Oduyoye's experience forms part of women's experience that Professor Rakoczy describes as subordinating experiences that women encounter within culture and religion including academia, which often make them appear as less equal to men. If not for gender polity, there is no justification why she should be asked to go and make tea for the faculty staff; whilst the designated staff whose job description it is, sits back. In corroboration, Mercy Oduyoye's resilience is linked to Professor Rakoczy's account of African women's act of trusting God and self, which facilitate their act of self-identity. They are resilient in redefining 'who they are', 'who they are becoming', 'and who they ought to be', and in Professor Rakoczy's perspective women's ability to define themselves is an empowering stance as well as self-liberating. With this, we explore the next section, focusing on women's interpreting experience.

## **Women's Interpreting Experience**

Essentially, women's interpreting experience is located within the framework of feminist movement and resilience, which is linked to feminist spirituality of trusting God and self. The emphasis is that women's flourishing must begin by trusting 'who they are' and how they interpret their experience of God in their lives (Rakoczy 2011). It is a hermeneutical stance of expressing and understanding 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming' based on their lived experiences. Therefore, women are in the best position to tell (narrate) their own stories, as such express and interpret the meaning they make out of it and the world they live in.

This expression of being allowed to tell their own stories is linked closely to contemporary psychologists' proposal, which advocates that one of the best ways to study and understand human behaviour is to gain an insider perspective (Creswell 2013; Silverman 2005) by allowing persons to tell their own stories themselves (Babbie & Mouton 2005). Of course, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that women's disposition to telling their own stories also includes the ability to interpret these stories, through which they make sense of 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming'. Embedded in such understanding of 'who one is', including 'who one is becoming' is enrobed around the issues of self-awareness, which is part and parcel of emotional intelligence (EI), reflecting an everyday skill for effective life living. Some scholars such as Goleman (1995) describe this as ability to monitor one's own emotions/feelings and that of others whilst Bar-On 2006/2007 perceives EI as attributes of non-cognitive capacities. Correspondingly, interpreting experience forms part of the foundational spirituality (flourishing/energising) for women across the globe, of which the African women is no exception. In this perspective, women doing theology in today's new dispensation have exhibited ample strength of character in valuing 'who they are' as could be seen in the narratives of the South Africa Women's march to resist the pass law, and in the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa (much of her narrative will be told later) and in Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye's life and among many other African women. Hence, African women of the past, present and into the future will continue to need the trusting experience in God and self as fundamental spirituality that will enable them to flourish (energising) and surmount oppositions, particularly all forms of societal gendered (patriarch) oppositions that hold them back from achieving fullness of life. Partly, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that such search

for meaning in trusting experience is of value to the 21<sup>st</sup> century African women, facilitating their interpretation and trusting of personal/collective experiences of self and God. Hence, African women engage their experiences of trusting and interpretation as a tool to grapple with and navigate gendered antagonisms no matter how long it takes.

### **Life Story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa**

Additionally, Professor Rakoczy uses narratives to theologise. This is exemplified in the life of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa. This narrative portrays how Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa struggled with long-term denial of admission to priestly ordination for 27 years. The denial was based on gender construct, which was culturally informed and sustained. Professor Rakoczy's analysis of women trusting experience in God and themselves serves as liberation theology upheld by Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa resilience until when she was finally admitted to ordination.

Professor Rakoczy in presenting women's spirituality of trusting in God and themselves engaged three women's life stories, of which one of them was Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa, who was born in Johannesburg in 1972, and was raised in a large family of 13. Her parents were devout Christians. She studied in a variety of educational institutions, and was a pioneer female student of Adams Geological School, near Durban in the 1954. However, her studies were meant to prepare her for ordination, but unfortunately, she was denied ordination on the grounds of gender in the United Congregation Church in Southern Africa. At that time women were not freely admitted to ordination, and Rev. Victory Nomvete herself remarked: "Because I was a woman, I was not allowed to be ordained or pastor a church. I was always put under another minister... I had to be strong emotionally to work under my classmates. I felt demeaned but at the same time I was fulfilling the call from God" (Rakoczy 2011:32-55). Obviously, she was trusting God and herself; her sense of belief in God and in herself enabled her to endure what seems frustrating. Interpreting her own experience, as has been stated above, she felt subordinated although she did not give up her internal resolve to serve God and his people in whatever capacity she was allowed (by the male Church) to do so. What gave meaning to her life was the fact that, she was able to fulfil God's will for her in serving God and God's people whether as an ordained minister or not.

This aspect of being denied ordination was and still continues to be the experience of many women across the globe in many Christian faith Churches, of which African women are no exception. Yet, women based on their spirituality of trusting God and self are not frightened or intimidated by any form of restriction until victory is won as stated by Annie Silinga of the ANC Women's League during the march resistance for the imposition of pass law against women in South Africa. Hence, it is clear that women of the past, present, and the future hold onto to their trust in God to surmount all limiting experiences that hold them back from achieving the peak of their desires. Consequently, Rev. Victory's perseverance to accept the assigned position of studying Christian Education in place of studying for ordination is admirable. Her perseverance was a source of liberty, which enabled her to survive the trying moment and demotion as not worthy to be ordained.

After her graduation she worked in the United Bantu Congregational Church, where she served as a field worker and a matron at Inanda Seminary near Durban, and a teacher in Groutville. However, Rev. Victory never gave up on her desire to be admitted to ordination, so in 1968, when the United Congregational Church was re-organised, Victory once again applied for ordination, but was refused. That notwithstanding, she continued to minister with the YWCA as a field worker, as a matron at Inanda Seminary near Durban, and as a teacher in Groutville. Yet, she still felt deeply called to ordination.

She got married to Reverend Andrew Mbanjwa in 1973 when she was 46 and became step-mother to his three children from a previous marriage, when they lived in Bisho. At this time when she got married in 1973, her husband heads a very big church with outstations, and she was given a congregation to look after as she worked with her husband but yet not admitted to ordination. Again, in 1979 she applied for ordination for the second time and still it was denied. In spite of the continual denial to be admitted to ordination, she gave sermons at church assembly and she was fondly affirmed for sermon she delivers. In this regard, she narrates that she preached very well; expressing that "I passed the test and my name was put on the list for any church willing to invite me to preach their sermon but unfortunately not even one church invited her" (Phiri 2002:119-138). This lack of invitation to preach sermon despite her capacity to deliver inspiring sermon speaks volumes regarding the relegation she encountered as a woman.

Eventually, when her husband was ready to retire, they moved to his birthplace in Ndaleni, Richmond, in KwaZulu-Natal. During the 1990s this area was the scene of constant violent faction fighting between the African National Congress (ANC), and the United Democratic Front (UDF). One of their sons took his father to Umlazi for a while since men were targeted in the violence. Her husband died of a heart attack in 1996 in the midst of the violence.

A year later after her husband's death, Rev Victory applied for ordination for the third time even though she was growing older but her confidence in her call to be a minister had not wavered. In her narrative as a woman trusting in God and herself as well as interpreting her own experience, she recalled that the main reason why she applied for ordination in 1997 was because no church buried her people when they died during the political turmoil. Secondly, no church minister gave the sacraments to her people and thirdly, no minister from my church came here to baptize children when they were born (Rakoczy 2011 citing Phiri 2002:131). For her, this was the only time the church officials took her request seriously, most probably because as she had said, "No minister wants to come here [in the mist of the on-going violence]" (Rakoczy 2011 citing Phiri 2002:131).

She was ordained on 12 February 2000 at St. Marys Anglican Church in Richmond. Sadly, few people attended because the regional office of the church did not publicise her ordination widely. She was the first black South African woman ordained to the ministry. She waited for 27 years to be admitted to ordination, what a strong spirit of endurance, which has arisen out of women's spirituality of trusting God and self. Probably, what kept hope alive in her was African women's liberation spirituality – trusting that it was never too late to do what God has asked her to do.

Unfortunately, her problems continued after ordination. Male ministers continued to undermine her as she continued to work under a male minister. In addition, she was never paid a just salary, which often times are women's constant experience in work places. This experience of women as being located in the subordinated position at work have been expressed by Hall (2016:69-88). In analysing her experience, Rakoczy likens her encounter to Klaus Fiedler's comment as quoted in Phiri, expressing that: "if a job is too hard for men, God will send a woman" (Rakoczy 2011 quoting Klaus Fiedler as cite in Phiri 2002:136). The implication of such an experience, as Rakoczy puts it, is indicative of Rev. Victory's persis-

tence in trusting God and herself, which led her to endure all the obstacles she encountered. She did not relent in her resolve to answer God's call no matter how long it took her, waiting for almost three decades before being admitted to ordination. Although, Phiri's analysed it to mean that: In her [Rev. Victory] generation, God chose to call a woman because times were hard!" (Phiri 2002 in Rakoczy 2011). But going beyond her generational location is the fact that Rev. Victory Mbanjwa exhibited an unflagged conviction as women always do in trusting God and themselves despite all form of obstacles they encounter in life. Her call was tested. Indeed, she was pushed around in a variety of ministries which were deemed appropriate for women by the male Church, such as in studying and teaching Christian Education yet she did not give up. In the face of so many years of opposition she persevered, full of confidence that God's will eventually manifest in her life. Ultimately, it could be summed up that her life was a true accountability of how an African woman has trusted in God and herself, and as well interpreted her own experience of limitation in the face of gendered restrictions in the Church and culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has presented Professor Rakoczy's thematic analysis of feminist spirituality reflecting women's trust in God and themselves, through which women anchor their resilience in overcoming gendered obstacles that hold them back. One of the enduring arguments that Professor Rakoczy showcases is based on the fact that women of today are doing theology, and in this new dispensation, women have exhibited ample strength of character in valuing 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming', therefore, they are able to challenge themselves to redefine 'who they are'. In the process of redefining 'who they are', it is obvious that women are energized to liberate themselves, therefore, voice their position of self-worthy and recognition.

The affirming stance for women's redefinition of self is manifested in their experience of trusting God and self, which facilitate their ability to be agentic such as in the case of South Africa Women's march to resist the pass law, and in the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa, who

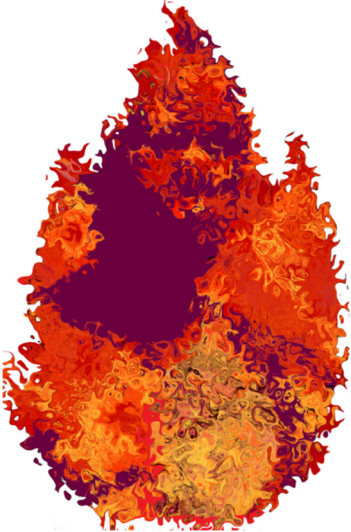
waited for 27 years to gain access to ordination and in the life example of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye who have always stood out as life-giving for African women and women across the globe. Hence, African women of the past, present and into the future will continue to need the trusting and interpreting experience of self and in God as fundamental spirituality (flourishing/energising) to surmount oppositions, particularly all forms of societal gendered (patriarch) oppositions that hold them back from achieving fullness of life. Partly, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that such search for meaning in trusting experience is of value to the 21<sup>st</sup> century African women, facilitating their interpretation and trusting of personal/collective experiences of self and God. Hence, African women engage their experiences of trusting and interpretation as tool to grapple with and navigate gendered antagonisms no matter how long it takes.

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# SECTION THREE



## 15 | Talking Feminist, Talking back: Sarojini Nadar’s African Feminist Transdisciplinary Study of Religion

*Megan Robertson*

### Abstract

In this chapter I trace the ways in which Sarojini Nadar has negotiated, shaped and challenged the study of faith and feminism – what she refers to as “the f- words” – in contemporary South Africa. I draw on Nadar’s academic writings, notable oral presentations, interviews, as well as my own personal interactions with her as my doctoral supervisor, mentor, manager, and sister-friend. I frame Nadar’s contribution to the study of gender and religion in relation to her analysis of violence in Biblical text, in church and public life, and in higher education. Through her scholarship and embodied work, I argue that Nadar has created a toolkit for talking back to patriarchal and heteronormative power in these various spheres. Not only does Nadar provide young black African scholars of religion with crucial underpinnings from which to continue to talk back, but she also demonstrates *how* this can be done in socially just and transformative ways.

**Keywords:** African feminism, interventionist, transformation, talking back, transdisciplinary

### Introduction

Sarojini Nadar introduced me to the feminist idea of ‘talking back.’ I was fortunate enough to attend Nadar’s inaugural lecture at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in August 2016 titled, ‘Sacred Sex, Sacred Text: Queering religious sexual scripts in transforming African societies.’ She had just taken up her current position as a research chair, now named the Desmond Tutu Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice, while I had recently taken her up on an offer (made in jest a few years earlier)

to pursue my PhD with her as my supervisor. I sat in her inaugural lecture in awe and anger. Never before had my previous training in white-washed, masculinised sociological theory spoken deeply to me and my experiences in the way that Nadar's lecture then did. After attending the lecture, I went home and cried.

I have been over this experience in my head many times before, and often wondered what the tears meant. At the time my now husband interpreted it through his own theological training, as a calling. In other words, he suggested that it may be that researching and lecturing on religion and gender was what I was called by God to do. I still have my doubts about this interpretation, but what I do now know is that, at least in part, the tears came because listening to Nadar and reading her work felt like someone was giving me – a young Coloured<sup>1</sup> woman from Cape Town – permission to talk back for the first time. Nadar's body of work continues to serve as a source of permission for me to talk back to the racism and heteropatriarchy that has often led me to silence, doubt and make 'decent'<sup>2</sup> my own voice and experiences. Moreover, in her work she helpfully provides the analytic tools, theories and concepts that have taught me *how* to talk back in meaningful, critical and even hopeful ways.

I use this as my introduction not because I want to take up a role as a praise singer. Indeed, Nadar herself would hate if this was simply a hagiography. I begin with this personal reflection because one of the key tools Nadar has given me is the ability to position myself in my writing. I cannot remove my admiration for Nadar and her work and I do not believe I need to pretend here that my assessment of her work is objective because, as all good feminist work reminds us, there is no such thing. However, that does not negate the criticality with which I approach her contribution to the study of religion. I also believe that my admiration reveals the depth and significance of the type of research and teaching that Nadar theorises and embodies precisely because it speaks to the lived realities of women in South Africa and serves as a catalyst for positive

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<sup>1</sup> "Coloured' was a racial category constructed in apartheid to classify people who were racially mixed or ambiguous. It remains in use as a marker of identity. It has also become a politicised, contentious and fluid category which people negotiate in various, complex ways" (Jodamus, Robertson and Nadar, 2022, 14).

<sup>2</sup> I refer here to Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2000) work in which she critiques the ways in which Christian concepts of decency operate to restrict and oppress.

change. This chapter is therefore simultaneously a reflection of what Nadar has meant to me, as well as of the contribution she has made to the study of religion and culture. I utilise a range of data for this chapter as I draw on her academic and media publications, notable oral presentations, interviews, as well as my own personal interactions with her as my doctoral supervisor, mentor, manager, and sister-friend.

In the proposed chapter outline for this book, Nadar's work was characterised as womanist theology, a position which she herself aligned with in her earlier work. Inspired by the work of African-American scholars such as Renita Weems, Katie Cannon, Traci West, Vanessa Lovelace and Mitzi Smith, Nadar first wrote from a South African Indian womanist perspective.<sup>3</sup> While this enabled her to incorporate race, culture and class into her gendered analyses of religion, and to consider her positionality in producing theory – for most of her career she has instead identified as an African feminist scholar of religion, and more particularly Christianity. Nadar builds on the work of scholars who appropriated this theoretical genre to various degrees such as Madipoane Masenya who presents a Bosadi (womanhood) approach<sup>4</sup>, Musa Dube who names her work as post-colonial feminist<sup>5</sup>, and Musimbi Kanyoro who introduced African feminist cultural hermeneutics<sup>6</sup>. Inspired by their work, Nadar joins them in talking back to theologians who have (and continue to) avoid or dismiss feminism as a Western import imposed upon indigenous people in Africa.<sup>7</sup> While she acknowledges that some versions of Western or white feminism exclude discourses of race and class, she also maintains that of-

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<sup>3</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Living in two worlds: Spirituality and the changing role of the South African Indian Woman in the Full Gospel Church," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 14, no. 2 (2001) 76.

<sup>4</sup> Madipoane Masenya, "Redefining ourselves: A Bosadi (Womanhood) approach," *Old Testament Essays* 10, no.3 (1997) 439-448.

<sup>5</sup> Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Indiana: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda: A case study of the Jacob Zuma rape trial," *Missionalia* 37, no. 1 (2009d) 88.

ten these rejections, “hide other biases, such as an unwillingness to recognise that gender equality can and must be part of African cultures too.”<sup>8</sup> In this chapter I trace how Nadar has negotiated, shaped and challenged the study of faith and feminism – what she refers to as “the f-words” – in contemporary South Africa and Africa more broadly.

Nadar’s scholarship interrogates the relationship between religion and gender-based violence. In one of her early articles published in 2002 she asks, “How is it that we find suffering bodies of used and abused women right from Biblical times into our very own century in the midst of people that claim to be religious, in the midst of people who engage in religious discourse?”<sup>9</sup> While she has expanded and contextualised this question in different ways, over the last two decades she has provided a variety of nuanced answers to this question. Furthermore, her oeuvre constructs an African feminist conceptual, epistemological and methodological toolkit for others to draw on in order to engage this question in critical and meaningful ways. In this chapter I provide an overview of her toolkit in relation to three key areas namely, 1) violence in the (Biblical) text, 2) violence in the church and public life and 3) violence in the academy.<sup>10</sup> I reflect on how she reveals the ways in which discourses, ethics and beliefs foster violence in these three areas but also how she marks out ways in which these aspects of religion can be transformed for a more just, free and equitable world.

## Violence in the text

Despite South Africa adopting a progressive constitution in 1994, granting all women full rights and protections as citizens, violence against women has continued unabated. A significant factor in this trend, as Nadar shows through her work, has to do with the role that religion and culture play in framing beliefs and actions. With the majority of South

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<sup>8</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “‘Stories are data with soul’ – lessons from black feminist epistemology,” *Agenda* 28, no. 1 (2014) 20.

<sup>9</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation,” *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002) 114.

<sup>10</sup> This is in part inspired by her own characterisation of her work when introducing herself to a group of American scholars in 2022 who visited the research centre where we worked together.

African's claiming to adhere to some form of Christianity, the Bible becomes an important "site of struggle"<sup>11</sup> for shaping beliefs and ethics about gender. As Nadar asserts, "the violence is not just physical or sexual but also textual."<sup>12</sup> She posits,

The Bible is...used to...justify men's headship over families, condemn same-sex relationships, judge HIV/AIDS as a punishment from God, and even prescribe women's dress codes etc. And so, injustice and an essential denying of people's humanity continue within the walls of the church itself, spurred on by that iniquitous term "Biblical values."<sup>13</sup>

Through her work, Nadar makes a notable contribution towards contextualising, critiquing and de-constructing the text by talking back to the perceived sacredness and infallibility of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> By talking back to this phenomenon, Nadar adopts an interventionist approach in her work on Biblical hermeneutics in order to not only open up "a window to the past", but also to critique the ways in which the text provides "a mirror for the present, so that contemporary challenges can be critically engaged with."<sup>15</sup> I identify three interventionist strategies which can be traced in her work, 1) reclaiming Biblical (women's) narratives, 2) (re)reading these narratives in community, and 3) contextualising those narratives in relation to the lives of contemporary women and contemporary struggles. I discuss the first two strategies here whilst the third strategy is discussed in relation to her work on violence in the church and public life.

Some of Nadar's earliest work is centrally concerned with reclaiming the narratives of Biblical women by using and further developing the tools of African feminist Biblical hermeneutics. For example, her doctoral research and subsequent publications focus on reading the characters of Esther and Vashti. Nadar uses a womanist approach to reclaim the character of Vashti, whose narrative of disobedience to the king is often read as an example of how women, and wives ought not to act towards their

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<sup>11</sup> Nadar references Gerald West's use of this concept. See Gerald West, "Redaction Criticism as a Resource," *Old Testament Essays* 30, no. 2 (2017) 525-545.

<sup>12</sup> Sarojini Nadar. "Queering sacred sexual scripts for transforming African societies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Susanne Scholz, 88. New York: Oxford Univ. Pr, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Sarojini Nadar. "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 93.

<sup>14</sup> Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 83.

<sup>15</sup> (<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/prof-dr-sarojini-nadar-i-believe-knowledge-is-power-and-critical-for-justice-work>)

husbands. Through re-reading Vashti through womanist liberation lenses, Nadar demonstrates that the character can instead be read as subversive in the ways she disrupts the Persian patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> She re-reads Esther too, a character most often characterised in opposition to Vashti and praised as an example of a loyal and obedient woman. Nadar however, contextualises Esther's narrative and, rather than viewing her either as an example of an obedient wife or a woman in power who abused her position and instigated atrocious violence, she understands Esther as a woman implicated in the systems of power of her time, trying to survive.<sup>17</sup> By reclaiming these narratives, Nadar talks back to the erasure and the male-centred gaze through which their stories are interpreted.<sup>18</sup>

In more recent work, Nadar turns her attention to (re)reading Judges 19 and to reclaiming the story of the concubine, Batshever.<sup>19</sup> Generally interpreted in relation to male homosexuality or homosexual rape, Nadar reveals that normative (and even queer) readings that seek to 'save' the text from condemnation of homosexuality, continue to violate Batshever. Through an analytic of sexual 'scripting', Nadar demonstrates how the male gaze, invisibilises, fetishizes and objectifies Batshever's body.<sup>20</sup> She maintains Cheryl Exum's argument that Batshever "is not just raped by the pen but also by the pulpit."<sup>21</sup> Using an African feminist re-reading, Nadar re-members Batshever's dismembered body. She writes an alternative script in the form of an imaginary interview where Batshever is given the opportunity to talk back as a theologian in her own right to the "vile", "violent" and "inviolable" scripts which have shaped her narrative.<sup>22</sup> Through Batshever's voice Nadar calls for "transgressive feminist sexuality scripts"<sup>23</sup> thus offering a reading of the text that supports social

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<sup>16</sup> Sarojini Nadar. "Gender, power, sexuality and suffering bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the characters of Esther and Vashti for the purpose of social transformation." *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002) 118-122.

<sup>17</sup> Nadar, "Gender, power, sexuality," 128.

<sup>18</sup> Nadar, "Gender, power, sexuality."

<sup>19</sup> While this concubine is unnamed in the Biblical text, Nadar borrows from J. Cheryl Exum's work to name her Batshever (Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 88.)

<sup>20</sup> Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 86.

<sup>21</sup> Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 89.

<sup>22</sup> Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 95.

<sup>23</sup> Nadar, "Queering sacred sexual scripts," 92.

change. That is not to say that Nadar argues that all oppressive texts can be reclaimed, and in fact she argues that there is power in recognising texts such as 1 Tim. 2:8-15, as oppressive rather than trying to rescue it.<sup>24</sup> Nadar's second interventionist strategy lies within her feminist methods of reading in community. Nadar has been critical of the use of Contextual Bible Study (CBS) by white scholars who frame it as a means to gain community wisdom about the Bible and its interpretations.<sup>25</sup> Her work reveals the theoretical assumptions underlying this approach to CBS and in particular, the paternalistic ways in which 'community' and 'indigenous knowledge' have been framed. She argues that, 'speaking with' and 'reading with' "camouflages the respective power categories"<sup>26</sup> associated with the community and the scholar and fails to consider the need to transform harmful interpretations that these communities may hold. Nadar reframes CBS through 5 C's (namely, Community, Context, Criticality, Conscientisation and Change<sup>27</sup>) which lends itself to an interventionist paradigm. This characterisation of CBS is evident in her description of it as, "an interactive study of particular texts in the Bible, which brings the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into dialogue, for the purpose of transformation."<sup>28</sup> The lasting influence of her characterisation of CBS is evidenced by Ujamaa's, albeit uncredited, use of Nadar's C's to inspire a similar 6 C's of CBS for their resource manual.<sup>29</sup>

While she often talks back to power, in relation to CBS Nadar also adopts Spivak's idea of 'speaking to' in order to conscientise communities and generate social change. She interprets Spivak's concept by arguing,

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<sup>24</sup> Nadar, Sarojini, "Paradigm shifts in mission: From an ethic of domination to an ethic of justice and love. The case of 1 Tim 2: 8-15," *Missionalia* 33, no. 2 (2005a) 303-314.

<sup>25</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "'Hermeneutics of Transformation?' A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement Between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities," *Scriptura* 93 (2006) 339-351.

<sup>26</sup> Nadar, "'Hermeneutics of Transformation?'," 345.

<sup>27</sup> See Sarojini Nadar, "Beyond the 'ordinary reader' and the 'invisible intellectual': Shifting contextual Bible study from liberation discourse to liberation pedagogy," *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 2 (2009) 390-391.

<sup>28</sup> Nadar, "Beyond the 'ordinary reader'," 387.

<sup>29</sup> Ujamaa Centre, "Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual," (2015) 7-8.

That even though we as scholars may gain valuable insights from community wisdom, what is intrinsic to our work is the assumption that we can transform our society. This is not always possible if we stop at the point of ‘reading with’ the community.<sup>30</sup>

For Nadar, an “organic intellectual” is best positioned to take on the task of speaking to communities – in other words, someone from the community, trained in Biblical studies and committed to “liberation in the community”.<sup>31</sup> This is because, she understands that a crucial part of reclaiming Biblical narratives for the purpose of transformation is recognising the positionality through which people, including the researcher, reads the texts. This passion for social change is driven by her own embodied experiences as she describes them,

first as being the youngest of seven children and growing up in apartheid South Africa, experiencing sexual violence as a child, then experiences of post-apartheid South Africa including the ambiguities of the fact that the new president of our country is someone who said in his rape trial that the complainant was asking for sex because she was wearing a skirt; thirdly, experiences of being a fourth generation South African of Indian descent, sometimes feeling like an outsider to South Africa and yet being refused a visa to go to India in 2002!<sup>32</sup>

While recognising positionality is no doubt important, I think the idea that only organic intellectuals can facilitate change within their communities should also be nuanced. First, because in recognising that positionality is not fixed (but intersectional and dynamic), it should not be assumed that ‘coming from’ a particular community enables better understanding or more organic interactions. Second, while CBS was developed around reading with largely marginalised (poor, black) communities, it has since been used in a variety of contexts. Therefore, a community may constitute a group of white ministers, queer people, or academics. Other intersections such as race, class, gender serve as various sources of identification and disagreement within these groups (as they do in marginalised communities) and therefore sourcing an ‘organic intellectual’ should not be seen as a straightforward task. Third, CBS has been shown

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<sup>30</sup> Nadar, “Hermeneutics of Transformation?,” 345-346.

<sup>31</sup> Nadar, “Hermeneutics of Transformation?,” 344.

<sup>32</sup> Nadar, “Beyond the ‘ordinary reader’,” 385-386.

to inspire a variety of creative ways of reading together. As I have demonstrated previously<sup>33</sup>, CBS-like methods have been used in contexts (for example with Ugandan LGBTQI+ refugees<sup>34</sup>) where they do not need to be conscientised about their own oppression – “in fact...[they are] uniquely aware of the cultural power of the Bible and how it has infiltrated various discourses against them. They have been... trained by their experiences and the discourses around them to reinterpret and reimagine the Bible in ways that even Biblical scholars may not be able to.”<sup>35</sup> ‘Speaking to’ should therefore, in some cases, be treated with a similar caution to what Nadar affords ‘Reading with’.

Nadar’s African feminist call for CBS and Biblical scholarship more generally to be interventionist rather than framed as an objective intellectual task is significant in large part because she is averse to transformative readings lying dormant in the realm of text alone. Throughout Nadar’s work there is an important thread connecting Biblical text, discursive practice and praxis (in other words, the ways in which it affects women’s lives, bodies and voices). This becomes even more evident in her work focusing on the church and religion in public life.

## Violence in the church and public life

Nadar understands violence in the text in relation to contemporary lived experience – in particular those of women, black and queer people.<sup>36</sup> She argues that the concerns raised about Biblical text also brings attention to the ways in which text frames discourses, ethics, beliefs and practices inside and outside the Christian church. Nadar has been critical of various church denominations and traditions<sup>37</sup>, broader bodies such as the

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<sup>33</sup> Megan Robertson, “Contesting and curating the Queer African archive with Sacred Queer Stories,” *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 21 (2), 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Adriaan van Klinken, Johanna Stiebert, Sebyala Brian and Frederick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives & the Bible* (Rochester: James Currey, 2021) 126-127.

<sup>35</sup> Robertson, “Contesting and curating”.

<sup>36</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “The Bible Says! Feminism, Hermeneutics and Neo-Pentecostal Challenges,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134 (2009a.) 131-146.

<sup>37</sup> This includes work she has supervised as well as her community engagements and traditions include Pentecostalism, Anglicanism and Methodism.

Council for World Mission<sup>38</sup>, and preachers and religious figures<sup>39</sup> and the role they play in relation to violence against women, black and queer people. A feature of her work is the way in which she draws on narrative. At times this involves the courageous telling of her own experiences of rape<sup>40</sup>, misogyny<sup>41</sup>, racism<sup>42</sup>, grief and exclusion<sup>43</sup>, at other times she draws on case studies in the media, such as the rape trials of pastor Timothy Omotoso<sup>44</sup> and Jacob Zuma.<sup>45</sup> Nadar reveals how religious text, discourse, and actors are implicated in these narratives, and in particular the harmful dichotomies that are shaped by them. One of the most persistent beliefs which the church relies on, as she reveals through these narratives, is an essentialised gender binary which subscribes to a “gospel of male headship and supremacy and female submission.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For example, Sarojini Nadar, “The Bible in and for mission: A case study of The Council for World Mission,” *Missionalia* 37, no. 2 (2009c) 210-228.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Sarojini Nadar, “Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan’s Mighty Men’s Conference as a case study of masculinism,” *Scriptura* 102 (2009b) 551-561; Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, “Liberated through submission? The Worthy Women’s Conference as a case study of Foramenism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (2010) 141-151; Nadar, “Queering sacred sexual scripts,” 81-95; Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “No holy cows in hate cases,” *Mail and Guardian*, January 11, 2019. <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-01-10-00-no-holy-cows-in-hate-cases/>.

<sup>40</sup> See Nadar, ““Toward a feminist missiological agenda,” 98.

<sup>41</sup> I do not cite a particular paper here as her entire oeuvre speaks to these experiences.

<sup>42</sup> See Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of theological burglaries and epistemic violence: Black theology, decoloniality and higher education,” *The Ecumenical Review* 74, no. 4 (2022) 541-560.

<sup>43</sup> See Sarojini Nadar, “God, grief and Good Friday: A response to Eusebius McKaiser,” *Times Live*, April 16, 2022. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times-daily/opinion-and-analysis/2022-04-16-god-grief-and-good-friday-a-response-to-eusebius-mckaiser/>.

<sup>44</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Moral responsibility for Omotoso lies with the churches,” *News24*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/moral-responsibility-for-omotoso-lies-with-the-churches-20181026>.

<sup>45</sup> Nadar, “Toward a feminist missiological agenda.”

<sup>46</sup> Nadar, “Moral responsibility for Omotoso.”

Nadar's concepts of 'palatable patriarchy'<sup>47</sup> and 'formenism'<sup>48</sup> are notable examples of how she provides conceptual and critical descriptions of discourses implicit in movements such as the Mighty Men and Worthy Women's conferences to produce palatable patriarchal discourses which valorise domineering, coercive and violent masculinity. These messages also construct a God framed by ideas of might, masculinity and militarism.<sup>49</sup> Another binary that Nadar critiques in her work is the theological divide created by religious discourse between the divine and the physical world which has framed the church's ambivalence around issues of gender-based violence, including HIV and its indiscriminate effects on black women in particular.<sup>50</sup> A poignant example of her frustration with this can be found in Nadar's open letter to the church on its silence around the highly publicised trial of pastor Timothy Omotoso, who raped Cheryl Zondi. She asks, "Where were you when Cheryl Zondi was being cross examined about why she didn't scream? Where were you when Cheryl Zondi gave testimony that Omotoso told her that they had a "covenant" relationship? Have you nothing to say?"<sup>51</sup>

Nadar locates African feminist theologies as central to the deconstruction of these binaries and in the development of counter strategies that talk back to discursive religious and cultural justifications of violence.<sup>52</sup> This involves developing alternative discourses and ethics for positive masculinity and positive sexuality. For example, in her work with Johnathan

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<sup>47</sup> See Nadar, Sarojini, "Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa – Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference as a case study of masculinism," *Scriptura* 102 (2009b) 551-561.

<sup>48</sup> See Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, "'Liberated through submission?' The Worthy Women's Conference as a case study of Formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (2010) 141-151.

<sup>49</sup> Sarojini Nadar. "God, grief and Good Friday: A response to Eusebius McKaiser." Times Live, April 16, 2022. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times-daily/opinion-and-analysis/2022-04-16-god-grief-and-good-friday-a-response-to-eusebius-mckaiser/>.

<sup>50</sup> Nadar, "The Bible in and for mission," 224; Nadar, "Living in two worlds," 79.

<sup>51</sup> Nadar, "Moral responsibility for Omotoso."

<sup>52</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "Searching the dungeons beneath our religious discourses: The case of violence against women and the 'unholy trinity'," *Agenda* 1, no. 66 (2005) 16-22, 21; Nadar, "Toward a feminist missiological agenda," 86.

Jodamus, they offer an indecent sexual ethics framed as a means of transforming Pentecostal discourses of repressive sexuality.<sup>53</sup> Nadar demonstrates that by drawing on black, feminist and queer theologies that “destabilise and decolonise normative narratives of faith through lived experiences of suffering”, helpful and transformative tools within religion can be constructed. Indeed, it is the imperfect black, feminist and queer God that “brought [her] back to faith.”<sup>54</sup>

## Violence in the academy

Nadar has incisively revealed what violence looks like in the South African higher education and how it is fuelled. I can best explain her contribution to researching and teaching through the metaphor of cooking. As an avid cook herself, I believe Nadar would delight in my use of this extended cooking metaphor to conceptualise her work (on condition of course that it be used cleverly and critically). I also think it is an apt metaphor which encompasses the remarkable, and often courageous, hospitality and care that I have witnessed her demonstrate as she prepares, cooks, and serves her unapologetically black feminist study of religion in the academy.

First, I discuss how Nadar has gone about preparing the ingredients. By this I mean the ways in which she prepares a space for the study of faith and feminism, especially for black women scholars. She does this by fighting for the importance of the study of feminism and faith in public universities<sup>55</sup>, and by demonstrating the importance of “getting to the bottom of people’s belief systems”<sup>56</sup> and of challenging fundamentalist confessional approaches through African feminist lenses. However, a large part of her prep work, is not publicly accessible. While a feast of African feminist approaches to religion is being served by Nadar, we only, I think, see glimpses of the mental, physical and emotional energy that has gone into producing the meal. I have had the profound privilege to

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<sup>53</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Johnathan Jodamus, “‘Sanctifying sex’: Exploring ‘Indecent’ sexual imagery in Pentecostal liturgical practices,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (2019) 16.

<sup>54</sup> Nadar, “God, grief and Good Friday.”

<sup>55</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “I dream of freedom to use the F-word,” *Sunday Tribune*, August 17, 2014a.

<sup>56</sup> Nadar, “I dream of freedom.”

see her politics in action in her position as research chair and Centre director at UWC. Nadar writes “When Black women find their voices in academia, only for them to be silenced or killed by a white and patriarchal academy, the responses open to them are either talk-back or kick-back.”<sup>57</sup> Through tears, anger, disappointments, and even health challenges, I have witnessed Nadar talk and kick back as she; fights against grant criteria that disproportionately exclude black women, provides line by line critique of research proposals, mentors young scholars (including myself) on ways to ‘make it’ in academia, and courageously calls out male colleagues on their racism and misogyny. This is the prep work that underlies her written work because for Nadar, the political is truly personal.

Next, I want to reflect on her cooking which is done with great care and attention to detail – it is most certainly not about simply adding and stirring black women into the pot.<sup>58</sup> In responding to systematic racism in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Nadar references a particular question which Judith Plaskow asks about how the journal continues to feel like a “white container” even when “powerful Black women and other women of color have both sat on the editorial board and been coeditors.”<sup>59</sup> Nadar responds,

I would venture that it is because the container is exactly that—it is white, and it is designed to “contain” rather than expand and take on new shapes and textures. The container is designed to invite others to be contained within its confines, to be “included” rather than to transform. The formula of “add women of color and stir” has not been helpful because the shape, style, and structure of the container remains white.<sup>60</sup>

Instead of adding black women and stirring, Nadar advocates for recognising the epistemological value and insights in black women’s scholarship informed by their embodied experiences and emotions – and allowing these to shape the various “containers” of the academy, religious institutions and society more broadly.<sup>61</sup> For Nadar, this is a matter of epistemic

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<sup>57</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger: Living with cracked containers in feminist scholarship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 38, no. 1 (2022a) 60.

<sup>58</sup> Nadar, “Stories are data,” 19.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger,” 61.

<sup>60</sup> Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger,” 61.

<sup>61</sup> Nadar, “Epistemologically privileging anger.”; Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson, “Rest, Recognition and Resistance: Drawing on the Womanist

justice and we see this in her work with Tinyiko Maluleke as they critique the violence and appropriation of the white patriarchal academy.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, I want to discuss how the meal is served. I refer here to how Nadar teaches students and emerging scholars in the study of gender and religion. Teaching, for Nadar, is not simply a diversion from the ‘real’ work of research, instead, it is a critical part of her interventionist approach to the study of religion. In other words, for Nadar social justice in higher education is not only about formal access to spaces of academia but epistemological access in terms of how black women shape knowledge but also what and how they are taught. While she has, at different times, framed her pedagogy as African feminist, decolonial, queer, trans or a mixture of them, the interventionist thread in her work again frames her teaching. This is aptly captured in the title of her article, “Changing the world: The task of feminist Biblical scholars”.<sup>63</sup> The task of changing the world is, at least in part, undertaken through a transgressive, transdisciplinary and transformative approach to teaching.<sup>64</sup> Through these principles, Nadar advocates for deconstructing the normative boundaries that distance and exclude black people, women, queer people and other marginalised groups. In its place, she promotes teaching as an embodied and dialogical process “that allows students, in Martha Nussbaum’s words, to become (or to grow as) “citizens of the world” who are actively concerned with democracy, human rights, and global justice.”<sup>65</sup>

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Wells of Katie Geneva Cannon,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 170 (2021b) 7-18.

<sup>62</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar. “Alien fraudsters in the white academy: Agency in gendered colour.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120 (2004) 5-17; Sarojini Nadar and Tinyiko Maluleke, “Of theological burglaries”.

<sup>63</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Changing the world: The task of feminist Biblical scholars,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (2009e) 137-143.

<sup>64</sup> Johnathan Jodamus, Megan Robertson, and Sarojini Nadar, “Transdisciplinary, transgressive and transformation: Pedagogical reflections on sexual ethics, religion and gender,” *Critical African Studies* (2022).

<sup>65</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Adriaan van Klinken, “Introduction: “Queering the curriculum”: Pedagogical explorations of gender and sexuality in religion and theological studies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018) 103.

## Talking Feminism, Talking Back

In the introduction to this chapter, I write about how Nadar and her body of work, not only gives me permission to talk back to power, but also provides me with methods, concepts and analytics on *how* to talk back in responsive and socially just ways. Nadar's toolkit for talking back can be summarised into three speech acts. The first is, '*dialogue between*'. Nadar's has advocated for the benefits of transdisciplinarity long before it became trendy. Her scholarship regularly crosses the disciplinary boundaries of theology, Biblical studies, sociology of religion, gender and queer studies, ecclesiology, and ethics. She opens dialogues between disciplines, religious traditions<sup>66</sup>, theory and praxis, text and experience, and by doing this, demonstrates the tools within African feminism that can produce more socially engaged and responsive work that is not confined by boundaries.

The second act of talking back is through '*telling stories*'. Nadar's own personal narratives and embodied experiences, feature prominently in her work, the telling of which she infuses with critical framings of gender and religion.<sup>67</sup> Nadar's conceptualisation of narrative and STORY<sup>68</sup> acts as methodology, epistemology, a pedagogical tool, and a motivation for research. As she reminds us, "Stories are not just told for the sake of telling a story, but for their power to invite us all to call deep on our courage to transform."<sup>69</sup>

The leads me to the final act of talking back which involves '*speaking to*.' As discussed throughout this chapter, Nadar is concerned with producing more responsive theologies, methodologies and pedagogies. She might best be described as an academic-activist with a commitment to transformational praxis. While the goal of social change has become popularised in scholarship in recent years due to the clout that decolonial research and teaching has gained in the South African academy, Nadar has advocated for this approach throughout her career. It is precisely this commitment towards transformation that impacted me so deeply in her

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<sup>66</sup> Fatima Seedat and Sarojini Nadar, "Between boundaries, towards decolonial possibilities in a feminist classroom: Holding a space between the Qur'an and the Bible," *Religion & Theology* 27 (2020) 229-249.

<sup>67</sup> Nadar, "Stories are data."

<sup>68</sup> Nadar, "Stories are data."

<sup>69</sup> Nadar, "Stories are data," 26.

inaugural lecture in 2016, it is what has encouraged me to continue to research and teach in interventionist ways guided by the principles and methods I have reviewed throughout this chapter, and it is this that continues to encourage me to continue to talk back as a young black South African scholar of religion.

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## 16 | **Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic: Reading the Engaged Scholarship of Sa'diyya Shaikh**

*Mujahid Osman*

### **Abstract**

In her incisive reading of Islamic and feminist traditions, South African scholar Sa'diyya Shaikh (2013) maps out the challenge of engaged intersectional scholarship constructing an analytic called "multiple critique." Deploying a feminist hermeneutical approach of rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing (O'Conner 1989), Shaikh challenges and reconfigures the boundaries of tradition. Her analytical and methodological approach is informed by three intersectional registers of intervening, disrupting rapacious normative configurations of social power, and suggesting capacious modes of being human. This chapter examines three interconnected themes in her engaged scholarship – religious anthropology, sociality, and the Divine-human relationship in Islam – to show how an intersectional approach develops discourses of compassionate succour for marginal communities by exposing the inner workings of dominant structures of power and cultivating alternative modes of being human.

**Keywords:** Islamic Feminism, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Multiple Critique, Religious Anthropology, Sociality, Divine-human Relationship

### **Introduction**

I first met Professor Sa'diyya Shaikh when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2013. We both attended the historic Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town and for this Good Friday service, she delivered the lecture. In the wake of the country's increasing instances of gender-based violence, Shaikh challenges the socio-cultural practices and norms that legitimate cases of physical violence. She argued for an ethics based on the liberative anthropological

potential to comport in the “best of forms” above the latency to be “lowest of the low” as observed in the Qur’ān (95:4-6). In her talk, she contended that the cultivation of capacious modes of being human is necessary if we want to radically change the nature of gender-based violence in society. By using a framing of compassion, Shaikh called for a restorative justice that not only responds to the survivors, but also addresses the “root causes.” This service was a clarion call for the liberative potential of religion in the struggle for social justice. I remember going up to Prof. Shaikh (in deep admiration) to thank her for her witness, telling her I would take her popular course, Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in my second year at UCT. After learning about my own tradition in that course, I gained insight into the broader struggle for gender justice in religious traditions, spaces, and communities. Prof. Shaikh advised my Honors research thesis project on queer Muslims in Cape Town and encouraged my pursuit of the ethical in the Study of Religion and in the process of being human. In this chapter, I reflect lovingly on Shaikh’s treasure trove of scholarship examining the interconnected themes of religious anthropology, sociality, and the Divine-human relationship in Islam. Through a close inter-textual mode of reading, I review her published work in conversation with broader scholarship in Islamic studies, gender studies, and liberation theology to place her contributions in broader tradition of engaged scholarship.

A South African feminist scholar of Islam, Shaikh frames religion in her personal interactions with parents and political experiences of the anti-apartheid struggle for liberation from racial capitalism. As a young adult living under normative violence, Shaikh found ethical inspiration in the spiritual resources of the Islamic tradition to resist structures of domination. Merging her commitment to Islam and her anti-apartheid activism, Shaikh presented a form of Islamic liberation theology refracting liberation and praxis through the struggle for gender justice, known as the “gender jihad” (Shaikh, 2021:120). Shaikh’s gendered theology of liberation connects the vertical (direct relationship with the Divine) and the horizontal (service to creation) as different points of entry into the longer journey to find the face of the God. Finding solidarity with Christian feminists in a local chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Cape Town, Shaikh draws on her engaged relationship to the normative legacy of Islamic tradition reframing notions of self/other by foregrounding the God-human relationship as the point of orientation (Shaikh, 2021:122).

Ethically committed to an “uncompromising resistance to injustice” and an “intersectional vigilance,” her praxis as a teacher, her activism in social justice struggles, and her scholarship as an academic show how experience as an analytical concept can be a central site of ethical meaning-making and knowledge production in Islam. To engage this process, Shaikh recommends an intersectional framework called a “multiple critique” (Shaikh, 2013:23). This approach is informed by three registers of intervention. First, Shaikh argues that this project engages in a structural critique of problematic elements within the Islamic tradition, possibly taking the form of an interrogation of androcentrism embedded within the hegemonic rendering of tradition. Second, Shaikh proposes a disruption of “the onslaught of empire in its many faces” by exposing its underlying coloniality, or spirit of colonialism, through a vigilance of neocolonial and imperial forms of feminism and later queerness (Shaikh, 2013:24). In this discursive jihad, Shaikh challenges the way Muslims are figured within the imagination of Global North. Third, an intersectional project requires a new form of theologizing emerging from an inclusive religious anthropology. By recovering and reconceiving humanizing aspects of the Muslim tradition, an intersectional project can uphold the human dignity (*karāmat al-insān*) of marginalized peoples and communities by deploying spiritual nourishment in the search for liberation (Shaikh, 2013:24). Through this tripartite approach, Shaikh develops an intersectional praxis attending to the overlapping ways in which power is produced, embodied, and reorganized. Shaikh’s framework goes beyond secular feminist critique. It also proposes the possibility of liberation inspired by the worldview of Islam. Through this analytical framework, I analyze Shaikh’s contributions to a spiritual politics of social justice.

This chapter is divided into three sections. One, I examine how Shaikh challenges androcentric religious anthropology, or male-dominated conceptions of the human from a religious or theological perspective through her analysis of the Qur’ānic (2:30) concept of *khilāfā*, translated as trusteeship, vicegerency, or moral agency (Shaikh, 2003). As theological anthropology informs the tradition of scriptural commentary, I then analyze Shaikh’s (2007) “tafsir of praxis,” as another manifestation of her commitment to uprooting androcentrism and challenging patriarchal Islam. In the second section, I examine debates around the practice of veiling and the politics of queerness. As the figure of the Muslim woman (and later the queer Muslim) is engulfed by multiple contesting historical legacies and contemporary patterns of power (Mohanty, 2003; Puar, 2007),

Shaikh carefully navigates the assaults of empire by exposing how Islamo-racism figures the political terrain of Northern development and intervention. While this section exposes the insidious workings of structural and cultural violence, it also frames Muslim intervention and contours the path of transformation. Third, through examining her engagement with the *Shaykh al-Akbar* (lit. the Greatest Shaykh, an honorific title), Muḥyī ad-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), I reflect on Shaikh’s reading of mystical theology and its liberative potential for society (2012). Ibn ‘Arabī was an Andalusian premodern Muslim thinker, jurist, and mystic who inspired a theological doctrine reflecting the radical oneness of creation called the Oneness of Being or *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Framed by the primary unity of God, called *tawḥīd*, Shaikh’s creative reconfiguration of Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual, theological, philosophical, and ethical treatises, explores the contours of an inclusive religious anthropology and its implications for a socially just and spiritually enriching Muslim law and ethics.

## Challenging Islamic Patriarchy

Early Islamic feminist scholarly interventions engaged with the primary sources of Islamic guidance, the Qur’ān (Wadud, 1992; Barlas 2002) and *Hadīth* (Mernissi, 1991). Later feminist engagements undertook to critique and transform Muslim legal system (Ali 2006; Mir-Hosseni, 2006; Seedat, 2021), philosophical virtue ethics (Ayubi, 2019), and mysticism (Shaikh, 2012). Shaikh contends for a structural-based critique of patriarchy, moving from a rights-based discourse to the development a systematic examination of the deeply endemic nature of male-power. While much of earlier feminist interventions strategically attended to the lack of rights for Muslim women, Shaikh’s intervention attends to the constructed nature of the philosophical, legal, or spiritual tradition as a socio-historical product of an elite group of men called the ‘*ulamā*’ (Shaikh, 2015:113). She therefore proposes to interrogate the underlying anthropology of tradition subverting various hierarchies of power constructing human subjects. By attending to the “metaphysical sensibilities that foreground the God–human relationship” above contemporary political sensibilities or cultural aesthetics, she grounds her intervention in the deep spiritual resources of tradition as opposed to so-called secular ethical ideals (Shaikh, 2015:114).

Through the lens of “religious anthropology,” Shaikh argues we can better conceive of the role of the human person in the worldview of Islam

(Shaikh, 2012:6-7). On the one hand, religious anthropology represents how the human subject relates to God. On the other, it also explains the ontological purpose of the human person and its role in the socio-political mapping of the cosmos. While some religious anthropologies propose an egalitarian ideal, most are premised on a binary sex system that holds the masculine as primary term and the non-masculine as a “deviant,” secondary term. Presenting a range of ethical possibilities within Islamic feminist discourses, Shaikh explains that the archetypal human, or the *khalīfa* of God on the earth (Q 2:30), signifies an intersectional or liminal figure (Shaikh 2022, 492). Linking the materiality of this world with the ephemerality of the hereafter, the *khalīfa*, or the moral agent or vicegerent, is meant to be the symbolic manager of God on the earth attempting to establish relations of compassionate justice. Guided by a primordial nature (*fiṭra*), the human as agent is capable of “discernment” guiding social practice (Shaikh, 2003a:107). Linking the *fiṭra* to the mystical ensoulment described in Qur’ān (15:29), Shaikh embeds religious anthropology with the capacity to discern an ethical path forward as agents of God (Shaikh, 2003a:107).

While religious anthropology informs sociality, it is often legitimated by readings of scripture. The Islamic tradition of premodern Qur’ānic commentary is rich with literary merit, but often limited by patriarchal and classed biases. Investigating this tradition, Shaikh exposes the workings of androcentric power. Viewing the Qur’ān as an “ocean without a shore,” she explores the multivocality of the text, analyzing the interconnections of authority, violence, and gender by studying Q 4:34:

Men are the protectors and maintainers [*qawāmūn*] of women, because God has preferred some of them over the other, and because they spend from their wealth. So, the pious women [*sāliḥāt*] are devoutly obedient, guarding the unseen, from that which God commands them to protect. As for those women who you fear ill-conduct and disloyalty [*nushūz*]: advise them, refuse to share beds, and [lastly] beat them [*wadribu hunna*]. And if they obey you, do not seek against them a way. For God is High, Great.

Explaining the embodied social world informing this Qur’ānic citation, Shaikh suggests that this verse, and its rich legacy of interpretation, is informed by a socio-cultural patriarchy that establishes men as the “protectors and maintainers of women” because of supposed intellectual and moral superiority and duty to economically maintain the household (Shaikh, 1997:59). The normative woman (*sāliḥa*) is juxtaposed with the

disobedient women who performs disloyalty and immorality through *nushūz*. For this category of woman there is a three-step remediation process of discipline: verbal admonishment, separation within the martial bed, and finally physical punishment. While this normative legacy has religiously inspired marital violence, it has also been robustly contested by feminist scholars and activists (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani and Rumminger, 2015).

In her contestation with tradition, Shaikh proposes a “*tafsir of praxis*,” whereby the process of “everyday ethical truth-making in the lives of ordinary Muslim women” is especially attentive to the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence (Mahomed and Shaikh, 2018:126). Inspired by her research interlocutors, Shaikh theologically resists marriages based on an asymmetrical power relation and rather follows the Qur’ān, calling for marriages based on mutual partnership, love (*mawadda*), and compassion or *rahma* (Q 4:1). Reflecting on her research findings, Shaikh contends that for these abused women “God is the antithesis of violence” (Shaikh, 2007:79). By juxtaposing the narratives of Muslim women’s engagement with Islamic ethical discourses together with their lived experience of violence, Shaikh’s “*tafsir of praxis*” suggests that the hermeneutical circle of interpretation needs to be reassessed, challenging patriarchal interpretations and reimagining egalitarian alternatives (Shaikh, 2007:74). Moving away from an androcentric form of disembodied textual interpretation, Shaikh proposes an embodied *tafsir* that aspires to read the moral arc of the Qur’ān in dialogue with her witness to marital violence. As a contention with the inherited male-dominated clerical tradition, Shaikh expands the vocality of the Qur’ān, grounding it in the “women’s full humanity in religious terms (Shaikh, 2007:89). By reclaiming tradition, Shaikh is reframing scriptural praxis away from androcentric clerical elites to marginalized social classes like Muslim women or gender minorities. A practical illustration of this ethical commitment is in Shaikh’s call for the establishment of ethical marriage contracts to protect both partners in an Islamic marriage as a means of finding justice in this world (Shaikh, 2022b).

In her resistance, Shaikh subverts androcentric religious anthropologies by challenging patriarchal scripts and expanding the notion of human personhood. Through this expansion, she challenges scriptural hermeneutics that posit a patriarchal and exclusive anthropology. She proposes an ethics of dignity that frames human potential as an egalitarian ideal for all human beings regardless of the sexism of the ‘*ulamā*’. Despite

their hegemony on the Muslim tradition, marginalized Muslims are wrestling power away from the male dominated heteronormative core. In this way they are embracing the text not as a “sovereign” entity, but rather in dialogue with the mundane of the everyday (Moosa, 2003:123). As Shaikh’s interventions within Islamic ethics demonstrates, Muslims can reconfigure religious anthropology and present the possibility of an egalitarian future. As Islamic patriarchy diminishes the humanity of women, gender minorities, sexual deviants, and normative men, it is also a part of a larger socio-political mapping informing the experience of Islam in the contemporary world. In the next section of this essay, I examine the onslaughts of empire as part of this broader mapping shaping, modifying, and responding to Islam and the practices of Muslims.

### **Subverting Colonial Feminism**

The legacies of colonialism have impacted many communities across the Global South. As former colonized nations from the Americas, Asia, and Africa grapple with their brutal histories of colonial violence, they also engage to subvert new forms of colonial control. Mahmood Mamdani (2020) contends that European political modernity translated into forms of political and economic domination, shaping the relations of power. While most of the formal European colonial powers have reduced their political influence, the spirit of colonialism still haunts contemporary postcolonial nations (Mamdani, 2020). Called the ghost of coloniality, this apparition influences the relations of power and shapes discourses and practices of domination, curtailing the full expression of former colonial subjects. Santiago Slabodsky explains that coloniality is based on “the patterns of domination that were developed during colonial times and that continue to reproduce themselves beyond formal colonialism” (2017:31). While the bodies of Muslim women were exoticized and essentialized during the colonial period (Ahmed, 1992), in the current period, the lives and bodies of Muslim women (and sexual minorities) are particularly organized through various mechanisms of statecraft that curtail their full expression and agency (Shaikh, 2003:150). Because of these forces of political economy, Shaikh writes:

the current debates on feminism, gender, and women’s rights in Islam are ideologically charged, since they are embedded in a history of larger civilizational polemics between the Islamic world and the West. Gender

discourses in contemporary Islam are prefigured by the history of a political conflict between Islam and Christianity, the European colonial encounters in different parts of the Muslim world, and the nationalist responses by colonized peoples. The processes of globalization, in tandem with neo-colonial configurations of power, currently pervade not only the concrete economic and sociopolitical spheres of most parts of the world but also the areas of knowledge production (2003:49).

In other words, through the histories of colonial domination, the figure of the Muslim woman has partly been shaped by a normative discursive and political context that reflects histories of domination and control. Shaikh's process of "multiple critique," subverts Eurocentric framings of Muslims and challenges internal impulses towards male chauvinism, linking the different registers of struggles for a feminist project.<sup>1</sup>

In the vexed politics of the *hijāb*, Shaikh and Nina Hoel contend that both secularist and Islamist body-politics curtail the choice of Muslim women by stripping the veil away from women in France and forcibly donning it on their bodies in post-revolutionary Iran (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:111). As aggressive French secularism frames the *hijāb* through the lens of a disruption of secular logic, it also maintains a xenophobic and racist body-politics that calls for the total assimilation or rejection of Muslims in European society (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:113). In Iran, on the other hand, the state performs a similar function whereby it coerces the wearing of the veil (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:117). As an ambivalent symbol, the veil has been deployed as a symbol of resistance to "Westoxification," however, it has also been a form of state repression that polices the expression of women.<sup>2</sup> By addressing underlying patriarchal control of secularism in France and Islamism in Iran, Shaikh and Hoel show how the agency of women is curtailed through state violence. The French and Iranian examples of *hijābi* body-politics exposes how women's bodies are sites of manipulation for the broader national projects (Shaikh,

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<sup>1</sup> Shaikh's notion of "multiple critique" takes inspiration from miriam cooke, see: Shaikh, "Transforming Feminisms," 161.

<sup>2</sup> Understood as a type of total mimicry, Westoxification was a term deployed to understand the cultural and political domination of Iranian society by the "West" (understood as the United States and Western Europe) before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Coined by intellectual Jalal al-e Ahmad, the term has come to signify a constellation of "moral dangers" imported and uncritically adopted from the West, such as relaxed moral standards (especially in terms of gender scripts), secularism, and capitalism.

2003b:151). While proposing multiple reasons why people perform Islamic practices (such as donning the *ḥijāb*), Shaikh shows how Muslim woman's agency is diverse. By challenging the "presumption of a universal womanhood represented only the realities of a particular group of women, namely First World, white, middle-class women," Shaikh draws on a tradition of "Third World Feminism" and calls for an alternative paradigm engaging the multivocality of Muslim experience (Shaikh, 2003b:154-155). As this epistemological category is deployed in the service of feminist and mystical modes of knowledge production, Shaikh suggests that praxis from the margins of society is a legitimate (and under-studied) expression of religiosity and therefore should be a point of orientation for Muslim ethics (Mahomed and Shaikh, 2018:135).

Taking up the limitations of her earlier work, Shaikh expands her feminist politics and engages the struggle for sexual dignity or the queer jihad (Kugle, 2005). As a multifaceted struggle for justice for Muslims with queer sexualities, Shaikh not only supports the call for inclusive sociality and legality.<sup>3</sup> She also exposes the insidious workings of colonial feminism in sexual diversity. In a co-edited publication, Shaikh and I argued that contemporary politics of queerness is skewed by a hegemony that prefigures Muslims as inherently violent and anti-queer. Echoing earlier Orientalists and colonial tropes, the current form of sexual coloniality suggests that queer Muslims cannot exist because Islam is inherently anti-queer, and any form of reconciliation is an example of internalized oppression. Drawing on Jasbir Puar (2007), Shaikh and I subvert these discourses by foregrounding the agency of queer Muslims to present their own embodiment of religious tradition. Complex and diverse, we suggested that Muslims with queer desires draw on the traditions of the past and to reorient their focus to support and legitimate their struggle for justice (Osman and Shaikh, 2017). Through a close reading of the case study of a queer-affirming religious space in Cape Town, we argued that queer Muslims present their own theologies by reframing dignity as a hermeneutical key unlocking the expansive vision of social justice in the Islamic tradition (Osman and Shaikh, forthcoming). Through a dialogue of fem-

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the various traditional and queer-friendly legal positions on the practice of same-sex sexuality, see: Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: One-world Publications, 2010).

inist politics, Islamic ideals, and intersectional experience, Shaikh develops a form of Islamic feminism attentive to the trappings of coloniality. At this point, we traditionally see a conclusion to a feminist critique. However, taking this process one step further, Shaikh deploys a final register of activism, future-orientated theological meaning-making. In the final section, I will examine her proposed theology of hope and empowerment through a close reading of her engaged approach to mysticism.

## Theologies of Hope and Empowerment

During the period of decolonization, many countries embraced an engaged religiosity developing a rich legacy of spiritual politics. Read through the signifier of the “poor,” Latin American Liberation theology responded to the “praxis of suffering” by reclaiming narratives of liberation to reimagine salvation (Chopp, 1986). Inspired by the activism of their comrades in faith, Islamic liberation theologians also produced discourses creatively rereading narratives, symbols, practices which affirmed the dignity of the poor. Inspired by liberatory readings of the Qur’ān (such as Creation myth or the Exodus Narrative), Muslim liberation theologians also advocated for peace with justice based on a diverse set of strategies (Rahemtulla, 2018). While liberation theology embraces praxis as the analytical key, Engaged Sufism’s approach to liberation is through reframing spiritual success (Harris, 2000). In the amalgamation of personal ethical cultivation and political justice, Engaged Sufism asserts that there is a symbiotic relationship between love and public action. Shaikh explains:

I am inspired by a central spiritual teaching at the core of my tradition, the insight that love and justice are integrally connected, that divine love is at the root of all existence and is the ontological or original womb of justice. In this regard, the Qur’ān clearly states that the command of God is *adl wa ihsān*, *adl* meaning justice, and *ihsān* – a more nuanced Arabic word – best translated in my view as ‘goodness’ that encompasses dimensions of beauty, love, and virtue collectively. In my analyses, when the impetus for social justice is driven by love, it is at its most potentially transformative and powerful (Shaikh, 2021:98).

By linking ethical cultivation with personal God-consciousness, Shaikh’s engaged ethics calls for the transformation of self and society. Shaikh and Scott Kugle (2006) contend that as “Sufis strive to create sacred and just

relationships between different people, between persons and institutions, and between human society and the non-human environment” they endeavor to cultivate political and intellectual connections between love and public ethics (Shaikh and Kugle, 2006:2). They argue that personal and private action are interlinked through the cultivation of virtues, allowing spirituality to flow into the everyday through the public manifestations of justice, mercy, altruism, and generosity. They write that “spiritual development demands an ethic of care that is socially engaged. Taming, mastering, and purifying the various inclinations of the lower self is not simply an individualistic spirituality but also one that intrinsically breaks down barriers between self and ‘other’” (Shaikh and Kugle, 2006:3). Taking inspiration from Sufi teacher, Junayd al-Baghdādi (d. 910), Shaikh and Kugle shift the focus from attaining spiritual ecstasy or secret knowledge of God through annihilation (*fanā`*) to the service of creation through subsistence or *baqā`*. As “states” (*aḥwāl*) or “stations” (*maqāmāt*) of the human spiritual journey, *fanā`* and *baqā`* represent an interconnected journey whereby the human subject is absorbed into the Divine (and gains greater intimacy and knowledge of the God) and presented to subsist (in God) for the service of creation. Through spiritual knowledge (*ma`rifā*), Muslims can get to know God more immediately.

Muslim thought has thus made the path to God accessible through knowledge of the attributes of God also called the Beautiful Names of God or *al-Asmā` Allāh al-Husnā`*, presented along a spectrum of beauty (*jamāl*) and majesty (*jalāl*), the two interconnected poles have inspired a range of Muslim possibilities. Sufi’s have turned to these attributes of God, as a way to understand the ontology of the Divine and its translation into sociality (Shaikh, 2012:76-78). As a theorist of Sufi metaphysics, Ibn ‘Arabī bequeathed a rich legacy of mystical ethics and theology based on these attributes. In his cosmological mapping, humanity plays a central role in Divine unfolding. As the “bridge or an isthmus” connecting the material and transcendental, the human being has the potential to reflect all the Divine attributes in complete harmony resulting in the cultivation of the figure known as *al-Insān al-Kāmil* or “the Complete Human Being” (Shaikh, 2012:72). Animating Ibn ‘Arabī, Shaikh says that “each person is at once a unique site of divine self-disclosure and simultaneously shares with every person the potential to comprehensively embody a balance of all divine attributes” (Shaikh, 2022a,;481). As such, through a

“polishing” of the mirror of the heart (*qalb*) the seeker can more harmoniously reflect the Divine within. Thus, through the practice of refining the self, the seeker can more clearly reflect the Divine (Shaikh, 2012:73). In terms of a gendered sociality, Shaikh finds fluidity in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas of the human. While much of this premodern Islamic tradition supports normative gender scripts, Shaikh reads Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual philosophy as a subversion of tradition through a “supple and relational ontology” (Shaikh, 2022a:487) expanding the normative gender scripts that constrict some and uplift others. Based on her reading she contends that for Ibn ‘Arabī “gender cannot be reified—that it must evade conclusive definition, that it will resist firm categorizations, that it will demand a recognition of its own irreducibility—primarily because it is an intrinsic part of the ultimate mystery of the human condition” (Shaikh, 2022a:478). As a critique of androcentric power, Shaikh says that her reading “helps to destabilize domination notions of male superiority” (Shaikh, 2012:83). Her analysis also shows how women are deploying their agency, against the dominant social system of mores, in search of an unmediated relationship with the Divine and an engaged social praxis. One such example is Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective on ritual leadership or *imāmat*. Shaikh proposes that her premodern interlocutor “de-legitimizes the position of those scholars who reject women’s *imāmat*” because he believes and argues that women have the same spiritual capacity as men and can therefore serve as leaders if they are knowledgeable (Shaikh, 2009:815). Translating ontological equality into social praxis, Ibn ‘Arabī opens new ways of thinking exposing the limitations of Eurocentrism and Muslim patriarchy.

While Shaikh has taken Ibn ‘Arabī as her creative and generative “future friendship” (drawing on Ebrahim Moosa who repurposes insights from Derrida), I am left wondering about a queer reading of an Akbarian theology (Shaikh, 2012:32). A central notion in Shaikh’s reflections is the notion of “mystical union.” Using the gendered metaphor of sexual union between a heterosexual couple, Ibn ‘Arabī frames the intimacy of union along overlapping registers: sexual union with a partner and spiritual union with God. Shaikh writes that the “love between men and women is, therefore, tied to the essence of human origins. It is a unique theophany that has the capacity to provide humans with an apprehension of the impetus for their individual and collective existences and relationships with God” (Shaikh, 2012:185). Through the language device of metaphor, pregnant with symbolic meaning, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the process

of mystical union signifying a special relationship between (hetero)sexuality and spirituality. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the experience of sexual fulfillment is also known as a moment of *dhawq* giving the engaged party a “taste” of *fanā*, “annihilation” or “extinction” of the self into the Divine. Teasing out this engagement Shaikh “provides men and women with the possibilities for ‘total annihilation,’ because each is a locus of self-disclosure for the other” (Shaikh, 2012:185-186). While this frame flips traditional gender scripts, it also relies on the partnership of an idealized heteronormative couple framed as the bedrock of a functional society. As a form of “spiritual realization,” the heterosexual pairing brings together the cosmological myth by reproducing, however dimly, the light of God’s creation and unfolding (Shaikh, 2012:187). It is thus unclear if a non-normative sexual pairing might also produce such a spiritual possibility. The ambiguity of the textual silence can suggest multiple possibilities. Can Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of gender support such a claim of authenticity beyond the sex binary? Although Ibn ‘Arabī subverts his normative cultural framework, he also supports the heterosexual pairing (as presented by the bezel of the Prophet Muhammad in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*) and reflects the broader social mores and sensibilities, despite a host of non-normative subcultures and gender expressions in premodern Islamicate societies that do not fall within the ambit of a gender/sexual binary (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Kugle, 2016, Peletz, 2009). In what ways can we think with Ibn ‘Arabī outside of a gender binary that suggests an inclusive possibility? Despite his sexual normativity, Ibn ‘Arabī could also be “disidentified” with. As a tool of survival, various marginalized communities have undertaken practices of subtle subversion because they “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 1999). As Muslims with non-normative sexualities and gender identities survive various intersections of violence, they can possibly queer the inherited traditions of wisdom by creatively “reimagining” the tradition along more inclusive possibilities and notions of justice (Omer, 2019).

## Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic

As a final illustration of intersectional Islamic feminist theology, Sa’diyya Shaikh co-edited a volume with Dr. Fatima Seedat called *The Women’s Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from*

*Around the World* (2021). In the collection of sermons delivered by Muslim women in many diverse socio-political contexts, Shaikh and Seedat placed these important interventions in dialogue with a longer tradition of “insubordinate Muslim women who have actively contested injustice” (Shaikh, 2021b:102). In this reimagining of tradition, they describe the novelty of some traditions by exposing the hidden histories of Muslim women fighting against gender injustice. As a form of “Muslim love ethics,” this archive of Muslim women’s voices provides “fresh theological insights and vivifying ethical possibilities in response to contemporary need” demonstrating how tradition can be adapted and configured with creative imagination (Shaikh, 2021b:103). As Atalia Omer (2019:154) contends, this type of reimagining of tradition is a “constructive tuner” that deploys tradition in service of contemporary calls for social justice and grounds activism in a deep spirituality. As religious activists reconfigure ethical values through solidarity, they present a new vision of community that is based on intersectional justice (2019:165). Through her engaged scholarship, Shaikh presents a more capacious framing of religious anthropology that is not premised on structures of violence or secular ontologies, but rather filtered through an Islamic ethics of love, compassion, and human dignity.

In this reflective essay, I have attempted to examine Shaikh’s intellectual and political project of Islamic feminism through analyzing her analytical approach, “multiple critique.” Through an intersectional investigation, she identifies the interlocking and complex manifestations of power in the tradition of Islam and in the communal practice of Muslims. By analyzing “questions of human wholeness from the perspective of a foundational God-human relationship” she attempts to reform problematics within the tradition, while also guarding against the workings of colonial empire (Shaikh, 2012:22). Going beyond, she also suggests that Muslims should cultivate alternative cosmic imaginaries based on ethics of love, dignity, and social justice. Shaikh’s ethics is grounded not in secular commitments but in a correct relationship that explores a multivocal response to injustice by cultivating nurturing and compassionate communities.

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# SECTION IV



## 17 | Women Theologies in Malawi: A Theological Narrative of a Matriarch, Isabel Apawo Phiri

*Phoebe Faith Chifungo*

### Abstract

It is an anomaly and very amazing to talk about the deficiency of women theologians in a nation where almost 80% are Christians and more than half of it are women. This means that the women's voice is lacking in most of these theologies. This chapter aims at analysing the theological journey of Isabel Apawo Phiri and how her journey has contributed towards the liberative theologies. The chapter draws on a qualitative narrative research design in which data were collected through oral interviews with the matriarch, storytelling, biographies and literature review. It shows that Phiri has contributed to theologies of liberation through her publications where she has profoundly condemned all kinds of women oppression but also through her sharing of liberating and empowering ways to women by re-reading the Bible from their own perspective. She has also explored a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women, social inclusion and gender equality. Her profession and academic success as a professor is also a commendable contribution since both men and women have benefited from her liberative theological lecturing.

**Keywords:** Women theologies, matriarch, Isabel Phiri, social inclusion and gender equality

### Introduction

Being a theologian in Malawi is one thing but to be a woman theologian is completely another thing. This is because most parts of Malawi have a patriarchal system where men have more power than women. As such, theology is placed in the categories of men and not women. To the surprise of many, Isabel Apawo Phiri is featured as one of the first women

theologians in Malawi. She overcame the cultural stereotypes ascribed to women, hence it becomes imperative to acknowledge her contributions to African women theologies of liberation. Therefore, this chapter is a critical analysis of the personal journey of one of the founding matriarch Isabel Apawo Phiri whose theological narrative is a big contribution and encouragement to many women who are the victims of oppressive patriarchal systems. The chapter is guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the theological contexts that informed this theological Matriarch's work?
2. How did her theological ideas challenge and transform patriarchy and sexual discrimination?
3. What are the outstanding contributions of her theology to the larger world of knowledge?

Her theological journey serves as an eye opener and source of encouragement to women at the verge of giving up on their careers as professionals and authors due to the unconditional environment of their culture and society.

Additionally, her narrative of how she boldly and steadfastly challenged all the cultural and religious obstacles gives hope to the hopeless women as she stands out to be the voice of many voiceless women who are suffering and dying in silence. Her theology which was instilled in her life beginning from her tender age when she was with her grandparents; where she was taught that she is created in the image of God and therefore can make it in life regardless of sex and gender helped her to sail beyond the cultural norms which looks at a girl child as weak and incapable of achieving great things. Despite being a notable woman theologian in Malawi and beyond, studies have not extensively explored her life story and contributions to women theologies. Hence this chapter seeks to fill this gap.

The chapter is informed by qualitative research methods in which oral interviews, storytelling, biographies (life stories) and literature review were employed. Data was collected from the personal interviews with the matriarch, storytelling, biographies and literature review. This collected data was thereafter categorized according to the emergent themes. These themes are the ones which formed the whole chapter. The chapter will show that her theological journey is comprised of some synopsis of her spiritual, academic, professional, publication and family life which

demonstrate her feminist theological acumen, which equip women. The chapter unfolds by presenting her biography with the view to bring out her contributions to liberative theologies.

## **Isabel Phiri's Background**

Isabel Apawo Phiri was born in Zambia on November 8, 1957 from Mr. Alex Chilamba and Mrs. Dorothy Chilamba (Phiri, 2020b). After 6 months from her birth, the parents went back to their home country Malawi. Unfortunately, her father died in a car accident when she was only two years old, leaving behind three children. Being born from the Chewa ethnic group in Malawi, Isabel's roots are from her mother's side because it's a matrilineal society. Her mother's name was Dorothy Namajengo Kazuwa (Phiri, 2020b) and her maternal grandmother was Naphiri Kazuwa. After the death of her father, Isabel was raised up by her step-father, Mr. Gershom Migodi, a son to Rev Damazeke Malembo of Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Gershom and Dorothy had three children (two girls and one son), making a total of six children. It was until Isabel was 15 years old that she realized that Mr. Gershom Migodi was not her biological father. It was her younger sister who discovered and told them that they had a different biological father from them (Personal interviews with Isabel, 25 August 2022). She took courage to ask her mother who explained to her the whole story. Although Mr. Gershom was a step-father, he raised Dorothy's three daughters from the first husband (including Isabel) as his own and gave them his own surname. They were all raised up as one family hence the reason why Isabel did not know Gershom was his step-father but as her own biological father. This experience has had a very big impact on the theological context that informed part of this theological matriarch's work. She experienced love from her both parents, and was brought up in a very conducive environment where both of her parents loved each other and their children.

## ***Her Spiritual Life***

Isabel comes from a family that has a Christian background. She owes her gratitude to her grandmother, Naphiri Kazuwa who every day from 4:00 am, prayed both for her children and grandchildren. Isabel believes God connected her mother to Gershom, a man of love and care who managed to raise up children from another man without any condition as if they were his own biological children. It was from her grandmother that

Isabel learnt the relevance of women praying for their family members. Her maternal grandfather was also a dedicated Christian to the extent that the church deemed it worthy to ordain him as a church elder of Lobi CCAP, Nkhoma Synod, one of the main line churches in Malawi. It was him who helped Isabel when she in 1976 experienced what she calls, “a spiritual crisis”. Her parents entrusted her in none else other than her own grandfather. She acknowledges how the grandfather helped her differentiate between knowing facts about Jesus, memorizing Bible verses and having a personal relationship with Him. She asserts this as the beginning of a deeper spiritual journey which finally, two years later led her to accepting Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and savior. Isabel considers this as the genesis of her theological journey. The historical background of how her both grandparents supported her spiritually led her to find out more about who God is and how she can also in future be a solution provider to those who are oppressed by all kinds of cultural and biblical depressions and more especially her fellow women.

As she grew up, she also joined Malawi Assemblies of God where she enjoyed worshipping God, the only set back was the fact that her parents being Presbyterian wanted her to be baptized as a member of CCAP of which she alluded to in 1967 when she was baptized at the Katimba CCAP, Blantyre Synod (Phiri, 1997:74). This serves us with some characteristics of our Matriarch some of which are:

- a) She was a born-again woman.
- b) She was obedient to her parents.
- c) She was quick to learn from her role models: grandparents and her parents.

This spiritual journey laid a fundamental foundation in as far as liberation theology is concerned because one cannot fight for someone’s’ freedom if herself/himself is not yet set free. So, the fact that the matriarch became born again it means she was liberated hence qualified to be the torch bearer and flag carrier of liberation wherever she went. According to Ackermann (2014:1), salvation has interesting connections with the notions of well-being and health with the vision for ‘abundant life for all’. It is therefore not a surprise seeing her promoting the full humanity of all who suffer and who are oppressed, including women. Again Ackermann (2014:9) says that salvation has to do with both freedom and grace; freedom because it transforms or frees human beings and human society from sin and guilt. She (Ackermann) has described salvation as a “doing

theology” in that it involves in fighting against any form of oppression. On the other hand, salvation has to do also with the unending grace of God which enables us to respond to Him in Christ. This is what Isabel Apawo Phiri did; fighting against oppressive systems; but Phiri managed to do all this because of being born again.

### *Isabel’s Educational Life*

There is a proverb that says, *chabwino chifumira kumadzila* meaning every good thing has its originality. The Isabel we see now is a true reflection of where she comes from, she is a replica of her mother and step- father who raised her up. Isabel talks of her mother Dorothy Migochi as a woman who valued education and who worked so hard to ensure that all her children, (not just few of them) attended good schools. She was a mother who made sure that all her children went to not just a mere school but those which were good for excellent results. This made the mother to work extra hard to have enough money because a good school demanded more school fees. As such the mother worked as a nurse and later as a secretary at Reserve Bank of Malawi. The money earned from here was mainly used to pay school fees for all children. While Dorothy was busy supporting the children with school fees, Gershom Migochi was busy meeting the family expenses for food and basic necessities as he was a teacher. So Isabel had her both parents as her role-models as far as educational life was concerned. She was inspired by her parents’ professional example. Hence, she either wanted to be a nurse like her mother or a teacher like her father Gershom. This means Isabel and the rest of the children had all the support needed from the parents in as far as education is concerned. Coming from the society that deprived a girl child from higher education and confined women to only domestic work, Isabel’s parents proved to excel above the cultural norms by equipping their girl child with the needed education. They knew that the liberation of a woman is the flourishing of a nation’s economy and the betterment of socio-cultural and technological advancements (Kiruki, 2010:7). The way the mother and the father supported each other in providing the necessities for their children helped this matriarch to develop the right theology of how a husband (man) ought to treat his wife (woman) and how together they should raise their children regardless of sex. Hence from childhood, the matriarch knew that a girl child, having being created in the image of God is entitled to good education, from a tender age the matriarch is equipped with the knowledge that both a man (husband) and

a woman (wife) are equal before God therefore each one is to be treated with dignity and honor (Mouton, 2015:19). It is from here that the matriarch's theology of liberation emanates. She had a father who liberated her mother to work as a professional nurse and a father who empowered a girl child to obtain high education. This is going to be reflected in her theological journey from her academic studies, then her professional work up to her publication.

Isabel went to several primary schools, but the most prominent ones were Lilongwe government primary school in the central region, Zomba primary school in the East region, Kanjedza and Limbe primary school in the Southern region. As for secondary school, she went to Providence Secondary School in Mulanje which is also located in the southern region. Thereafter she was selected to Chancellor College in 1977 where she studied Education in Religious Studies and History. One of her lecturers was an English man (John Parrat) and one of her best courses was African Traditional Religion (ATR). She narrates two lessons she learnt from this course:

- (a) That to some extent our religion is controlled and guided by our culture.
- (b) That as an educator she needed to be familiar with religious traditions beyond her because she was among the people who practiced other faiths like her husband's uncle who was an Imam (Phiri, 2015:8).

Isabel graduated from Chancellor College with a Bachelor of Education in Religious Studies and History.

In 1982 Isabel went to Lancaster University in England where she got a Master's in education majoring in religious education and New Testament Studies. She considers her studies at this university as a big breakthrough and opportunity because African women were often discouraged from pursuing degrees in theological colleges and seminaries because they were meant for training ordained ministers and few African churches ordained women (Phiri 2009:6). Since she was not an ordained woman, it means Isabel challenged, defeated and transformed patriarchal system, tribalism, racism and sexism. In as much as this was recorded as historical, it was also a big breakthrough to the family of women who were aspiring studying theology. They affirmed that indeed nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). She became the role model to many women.

Isabel also had a mentorship course called “Programme on Theological Education” (PTE) under two African mentors and one of them was John Pobe, Ghanaian New Testament scholar, educator and ecumenist. This was a great opportunity because it introduced Phiri to global conversations about the purpose and nature of theological education.

In 1990 she started her PhD studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa where she was under the supervision of John W. de Gruchy, a professor of Christian Studies and Political theology and a co-signer of the Kairos document (Kairos theologians, 1986:54). Her PhD studies exposed her to new methodologies of how to use the frameworks of feminist theology, ecumenism and African theology to resist racism and sexism (Phiri, 2020a:67). From this she developed her PhD thesis on African Women in Religion and Culture; Chewa Women in the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: A critical study from Women’s perspective. Her main research area was on the ritual practices at rain shrines in the indigenous Chewa traditions and the role women served as spiritual leaders. She also looked at how Christian tradition impacted women in the church of Central Africa Presbyterian and in what ways these improved women’s lives or served to marginalize them.

The impact of her spirituality she got from her grandparents, the moral and financial support she received from her parents helped the matriarch to proceed to university where out of all the courses which were offered there, she chose religious studies and history. This was not just a coincidence, but it was due to the theology which was building up in her since she was young. The Bible says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” (Proverbs 22:6).

### *Isabel’s Academic Papers*

Isabel has contributed to scholarship which is liberative in many ways. Among the notable publications is the first book to be written by a women theologian (Phiri, I.A. 2007. *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious experience of Chewa women in central Malawi*. Kachere Press, Malawi). The book is an interpretation by an African woman in matrilineal society of how “woman” is constructed by patriarchy in African church and culture. Isabel paints in bold strokes that the construction of a woman by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way

women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged. The book's intention is to criticize all that oppresses African women. Her main argument is that the coming in of Christianity to matrilineal societies meant a transfer of religious power from women to men. Originally matrilineal traditional culture included both elements in which the dignity of women was affirmed but also elements which were oppressive. Unfortunately, argues Isabel that the coming of Christianity promised liberation from some oppressive matrilineal traditional culture but the promise was not fulfilled, instead the missionaries introduced teachings and practices which placed women in subordinate positions in society and reinforced some of the negative cultural elements. All this affirms the author, was legitimized by reference to Biblical texts. This has resulted in having African women experiencing oppression at various levels and in various ways rather than the full liberation which the gospel of Jesus Christ offers.

Isabel's interpretive focus here is on exposing what Ackermann (1989:55), calls, "Clericalism" encoded in the biblical text in view of the fact that it is texts like these, *inter alia*, that have been used over the ages by the church to rule against women's ordination. Clericalism has been defined as that which expropriates ministry from the community of women and men into a separate clergy caste and is built on a patriarchal world view.

Building around a schematic framework to structure her analysis, Isabel goes on to share the liberating and empowering ways to women.

- (i) Re-reading the Bible from their own perspective.
- (ii) Interacting with other women in continental Christian women's organizations like Circle.
- (iii) Recognizing the need for appropriate theological education which will enable them to retrieve the positive elements in their culture and the liberating elements within the Christian tradition.

Isabel's contribution to women theologies has also been through her work on theoretical frameworks for African women theologies (Phiri, I.A. and Nadar, S. 2006. What's in a Name? -Forging a Theoretical Framework of African Women's Theologies. *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12, 2. December 2006, 5-24). In this article Isabel and her co-author explore a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women; critic of patriarchy from a religious and theological perspective. Committed to gender

equality as well as social inclusion in general, the duo exposes the disproportionate portrayal of the male and female in some of the biblical passages and point out the gender implications of these skewed passages. For instance, Galatians 3:27-28 is cited (which says, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Another passage is Genesis 1:27 which says, "So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them: male and female He created them.") The main theological argument emanating from the above passages is that these are women liberating passages which are deliberately being ignored by the androcentric mentality. The equality of both male and female are clearly depicted in these passages, as such Isabel strongly abhors any sexism form. Instead, she encourages the full liberation of women from such antagonistic patriarchal system.

Additionally, Isabel analyses the writing of African women theologians (Phiri, I.A. and Nadar, S. 2009. *Going Through the fire with eyes wide open: African Women's perspectives on Indigenous knowledge, patriarchy and sexuality*. In *Journal for the study of religion* 22 (2) 2009, 5-21). In this article, Isabel goes beyond a description of African women's theology, and offers a critical analysis of what African women theologians are writing about and how they are doing it. Isabel's purpose in this paper was to present the unique contribution that women theologians are making into the study of theology. She analyses how women have for a long time being hindered not only from publishing books and articles but even from studying theology. Theology was meant only for men; this is a true reflection of patriarch system where roles are assigned according to gender. This is well articulated in her first book (2007) where she narrates that many men argue that African culture does not allow a woman to have power and authority over men because the African culture is patriarchal. This serves as the reason why the construction of women by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged.

Isabel cites her own example of how she broke down this patriarchal norm when she became the first Malawian woman to become an author of a theological book. She further considers her studies at Lancaster University as a big breakthrough and opportunity because African women were often discouraged from pursuing degrees in theological colleges

and seminaries because they were meant for training ordained ministers and few African churches ordained women (Phiri, 2009:6).

Isabel's critical analysis of African women's writing depicts a big breakthrough in African history of women liberation from just being housewives to being great authors.

In another publication (Phiri, I.A. et al. 2017. HIV and AIDS, Gender Violence and Masculinities: A Case of South Africa. *Journal Article*, 2017, 74-86), Isabel examines an adapted Stepping-Stones curriculum, which is used on church going couples. The purpose was to see if it promotes behavioural change in the area of communication about sexuality, fidelity and gender-based violence. The findings of this study confirmed a significant increase in communication among couples about their sexuality and a decrease in gender-based violence. It raised concerns about issues of fidelity in monogamous and polygamous relationships. It also confirmed the need to re-examine the theology of marriage in the context of African Instituted Churches. Isabel also examined African women's theologies in Southern Africa (Phiri, I.A. 2011. African women's theologies in the new millennium. *Journal Article 18, ISS. 61, 16-24*). In this article, she traces the development of African women's theologies in Southern Africa since its inception at a continental level in 1989, through the Circle of African Women Theologians, and analyses the methodologies and the content of this theology from the perspective of African theology. She further highlights the urgent need for theological and practical response to the issue of HIV/AIDS from a gendered perspective and concludes by suggesting issues that women theologians need to grapple with in Southern Africa.

In summary her publications have contributed a lot toward the theologies of liberations. For example, through her publication she has explored a strong theoretical framework on the liberation of women; she has openly criticized any form of patriarchy from a religious and theological perspective. Her publications have influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in the African church and society are imaged. She further highlighted the urgent need for theological and practical response to the issue of HIV/AIDS from a gendered perspective.

## Isabel's Professional Life

It is very encouraging to see that while other people were struggling to secure jobs, Isabel had a different story to share. She narrates that she was hired by the Religious Studies Department at Chancellor College,

Malawi as a staff associate soon after her graduation. This is very outstanding because to be employed by your own lecturers is a good indicator of someone's hard working spirit, trust, good behaviour, intelligence and integrity. It is not always easy to be employed by your own lecturers because they know you very well. She later after getting her Master's in education was appointed as a lecturer in African theology, New Testament and religious education from 1983 to 1986. In 1987 she joined the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion in Malawi*. She for five years served in a very senior and influential position as the Moderator for Bible Knowledge for the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations. Little by little she was becoming a Biblical Scholar and educator.

As she was on a Sabbatical leave from Chancellor College (Phiri, 2007a:117) she went to Namibia where she became a senior lecturer in African theology at the University of Namibia from 1996, May to 1997 August. In 1997 she became an associate professor in theological studies in Durban at School of Religion and Culture at the University of Durban Westville. In 2001 she became a lecturer at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal where she later became a professor in 2003. As a professor, she lectured classes in African Women's theology, African Instituted churches and theology in the African Context. While serving at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) she was honored with two positions. In 2005 she was the Head of the School of Religion and Theology and two years later, in 2007 she became the Dean of the same faculty. The appointment of these two positions were a significant milestone not only to her but to every African woman because African women were and continue to be under-presented in the faculties (Doerrer, 2015). The knowledge that she gained through lecturing these courses helped her to develop the theology of liberation.

Isabel also worked for six years (1984-1990) as a Youth commissioner for the program on Theological Education. She later served on the advisory board for the Bossey Ecumenical Institute from 2004-2005 and was also the moderator of World Council of Churches' Commissioning Education and Ecumenical Formation from 2006-2009. She is currently part of the Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN) which was launched in 2015 (Phiri, 2019). It is not a surprise to see God calling her into a position of Associate General Secretary responsible for public witness and diakonia program for the World Council of Churches, a position she accepted in 2012. With this new position, she had to move from South Africa to Switzerland. She later in 2017 became the Deputy

General Secretary for the same program and she was the first African Woman to hold this position (Personal Interviews, 2022, 24<sup>th</sup> August). Her main focus area of work is the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace which was the main theme at the 10<sup>th</sup> World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, South Korea in 2013 (2020a:62)

Isabel's work with the World council of Churches is seen as an extended version of her work within the church and the academy where she is able to connect faith and social justice. Her background as a scholar is what has helped her to deepen her work in Biblical and theological reflection and this is consistent with the World Council of Churches' emphasis on theology. She asserts that faith requires action as such she says, "Being an ecumenical church requires all of us to share together our spirituality and to act together because it is these two which make the presence of Jesus Christ visible among us and in our witness in the world credible," (Phiri, 2015:5). Her position as the Deputy General Secretary serves two purposes: First, it highlights her main strength and contribution to the world and also to women liberation. Secondly, it serves as a potential reference to the future world and work that it is possible to be an African woman and be able to hold a such high position of power.

The nature of the matriarch's job exposed her to interacting with both, the perpetrators and victims of liberation. Therefore, she had all the opportunity to share with them what liberation theology is all about either in classrooms or conference rooms. As such many changed positively due to her profession. Again, the courses and the positions which the matriarch possessed helped her to easily address the issues of patriarchy. For instance, courses like religious studies, New Testament, African women theology, etc. New Testament gives us a good example of Jesus Christ who fought for the rights of women. Again, the position she had in Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN but also as the deputy general Secretary responsible for public witness and diakonia program for the World Council of Churches was and remains a big inspiration to many women. Just seeing an African woman holding such positions is liberative on its own. It brings a message of hope to hopeless women and it also defeats all oppressive patriarchal systems.

## Isabel's Family Life

As Isabel's life was blossoming and excelling academically and professionally, there was one outstanding area which was lacking behind. This was nothing else other than having "the love of her heart and life partner". This was realized through her trip to England where she specifically went to attend the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. This trip turned out to be an opportunity of meeting her man. There is a local proverb which says, *Okawona Nyanja anakawona ndi mvuwu yomwe* meaning those who went to specifically see the lake fortunately ended up seeing the hippo as well. Another proverb goes like this, *Kupha mbalame ziwiri ndi mwala umodzi* meaning killing two birds with one stone. All these local proverbs are just an expression of how blessed and lucky Isabel was to have a double blessing from the conference. She went to the conference single but came back with a fiancée whom she will spend the rest of her life. This man was none else other than a Zambian Pentecostal Christian by the name of Maxwell Agabu. It was encouraging to learn from Isabel that apart from love, another thing that bought them very close to each other was their faith in Jesus Christ. The two love birds exchanged their marriage vows in Malawi on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1985 at Lilongwe Pentecostal Church (Phiri, 2020b).

Together they have one biological son by the name of Chisomo (Grace) who was born in 1988. They have also adopted two children by the name Kuleza who was born in 1989 and Cynthia born in 1990. Their first-born son Chisomo is still studying at University of Cape Town where he is pursuing PhD in Architecture. He also intends to pursue a teaching career as his own business. Their second born son Kuleza is also in Cape Town teaching at a private college in digital art and design. While their last-born daughter is in Malawi still searching for an opportunity of work (Personal Interviews with Phiri, 25 August 2022).

Isabel asserts that the secret behind their successful marriage is their willingness to grow together, support and inspire each other to grow to their fullest potential. It has been a mutually supportive marriage; spiritually they regularly pray together; academically they both have excelled well and professionally are all professors. (Phiri, 2020b:2). Hence, she (Phiri, 2020b) proudly says that it has been an "Iron sharpening an Iron in every area of our lives..." This statement reveals that the secret of Isabel's success in her theological journey. Being together spiritually, academically and professionally plays a vital contribution towards her work.

When she was given an opportunity to study PhD at the University of Cape Town, she made sure to take with her, her husband and Chisomo. Her husband is currently still a professor of Business Administration at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa. She is still in Geneva but they regularly visit each other more especially with the nature of her job, she frequently visits Africa giving her an opportunity to see her family.

Isabel is retiring this year (2023) and will settle in Malawi and Zambia where her husband comes from hoping to be visiting their children and a grandchild often in South Africa. She thinks the husband might retire together with her despite the fact that he still has some more years to work if he wants to.

### **Isabel's involvement with CIRCLE**

Circle is a group of concerned African Women Theologian comprised of all religions although the majority are Christians. (Phiri, 2000:106). Isabel's involvement goes as early as 1996 when she was in Namibia. She started this group there which was mainly comprised of Lutheran church women (Kanyoro, 1997). She utilized each and every opportunity to establish circle wherever she lived. For example, in South Africa, she established two chapters of circle. According to Fieldler, one was established in Durban (2017:72) and another one in Pietermaritzburg (2017:75). The Durban circle had at a certain point a membership of 200 and their main purpose was to theologically reflect on their lived experience, choose a research topic relevant to their experience, choose a research topic relevant to their context and empowered each other to publish. Her zeal for circle was so strong to the extent of even encouraging male scholars to present papers on transforming masculinity at the Cameroon continental circle gathering in 2007.

Through her leadership as the General coordinator from 2002 to 2007, Isabel made a huge contribution to the circle of concerned African theologian women including organizing the circle at the continental level. Through her skilful management, circle became highly productive by producing more books than ever. She made sure research topics depicted circles priorities for example Circle selected HIV & AIDS as a five-year research focus (Phiri, 2010). Through her, circle also received financial support which in long ran helped in publishing regional activities in a newspaper.

Regardless of all the above positive contributions by Isabel, she still received some resistance and discouragements from her fellow circle women. During the continental conference in Cameroon, some critics complained that the circle was only for the academicians from universities. This was a direct attack on Isabel because she was the one who encouraged both female and male on writing and publishing. It was emphasized at the conference that the circle should be made accessible to women even those outside academics. The goals were also re-emphasized. The accusations made Isabel, after her term of office as the General coordinator expired to withdrawal for some time from circle activities. She was succeeded by Fulata Moyo (from Malawi) (Fieldler, 2017:44). Her withdrawal affected the circle financially because the World Council of Churches which was the main donor withdrew their support.

Regardless of this setback, it is clear that both Isabel and circle itself benefited from each other. For instance, Isabel openly acknowledges that her growth and success in academics was mainly as a result of her active participation in the circle. Equally the same, many women and men from the circle have been mentored and supported by Isabel especially in the area of research and writing. She has been providing opportunities for collaborations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The chapter has explored the contributions of Isabel Apawo Phiri to theologies of liberation. For instance, her story has explained how her spiritual life, her publications and her professional life has contributed towards the liberation theologies. She concludes by acknowledging the impact of working with the International church organization (WCC). She says such an organization offers an opportunity one has to contribute from an African Woman's perspective which is not known by many people both in church and society. She says her understanding of the concept of justice for all has been broadened in that you realize that there is strength when all the marginalized people stand together in solidarity. You develop a holistic approach to the fullness of life in Christ Jesus. You grow into a broader understanding of controversial issues that the church deals with and your understanding of who God is becomes broader. She further says she sees God more as a creator of human kind than just as God of the Christian. She wraps up by narrating some of the challenges she

has encountered in her professional walk. She says that opposition of justice for all is real even from within Christian family because we live with contradictions where one experience intense hate from those who see themselves as defenders of God and traditions of the church. However, she says that such intense opposition and marginalization from the inside Christian faith itself should energize us to continue fighting the good fight of faith and justice for all. This is a true reflection of who Isabel Apawo Phiri is; she has really fought a good fight of liberating women from the oppressive patriarchal systems and her theology is a true reflection of her life story. Her spiritual life back home with her both grandparents guided her to choose religious studies and history courses in college. It is not a surprise to see that all her publications and courses she lectured were a true depiction of her theological background. It is therefore clear and straightforward that her historical background at home, her cultural environment, her academic and professional achievements have formed Isabel's theology of liberation.

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## 18 | **Against the Odds: The story of Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler and its theological significance in Malawi**

*Chimwemwe Harawa*

### **Abstract**

It is an anomaly and very amazing to talk about the deficiency of women theologians in a nation where almost 80% are Christians and more than half of it are women. This means that the engagement of women in Theology is an endeavor which is not without a history. However, the birth of the Circle for concerned African Women Theologians popularly known as the Circle in 1989 has aided the development of theology and has increased the involvement of women in theology. Through the involvement of different women theologians, the Circle emphasizes on innovative contextual and gender-sensitive interpretative principles of religion and culture, focusing on issues that concern women and children. The first members of the Circle in Malawi were members of the Central African Presbyterian Church. Among these were Isabel Apawo Phiri, Fulata Moyo and Getrude Kapuma. The second wave of Malawi Circle members were from the Evangelical Church. This paper centers on Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler an academician and a social worker, from the evangelical tradition, specifically the Baptist Convention of Malawi. The aim of this chapter is to narrate the life and the contributions of Rachael Fiedler towards Theology and the Circle.

**Keywords:** Theology, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, contribution, Malawi and patriarchy

### **Introduction**

All her-stories are perspective stories and I have chosen to write the story of Rachel Fiedler from the perspective of what I consider 'out of the ordinary' situations to the majority of women and girls in Malawi that may encourage those aspiring to rise as stars in the Circle. The coming in of the Circle for concerned African Women Theologians has boosted the

participation of women in the field of theology in Malawi. Though women in Malawi have played significant role in theology, their contribution has not been highlighted. This is the problem that this chapter wants to address by looking at the work of Rachel Fiedler. Since theology is viewed as a male dominated domain, deliberate effort has to be made to dig out and analyse the contribution that women have made in Malawi towards theology.

The main research question addressed in the chapter is, “what are the particular themes of Rachel Fiedler’s theology?” In examining her theological themes, I will concentrate on her line of thinking that challenged patriarchy or societal expectations then. The chapter will document some of ‘the out of ordinary’ life experiences and the contributions of Rachel Fiedler towards Theology and the Circle in Malawi and globally. I will discuss how Rachel accessed education, her work in the church, society and the academia. I write this paper as a member of the Circle and of the Central African Presbyterian Church. The chapter is based on the interaction that I have had with Rachel Fielder over the years and examination of her writings.

## **Accessing Education as a Girl in a Patrilineal Culture**

Rachael Nyagondwe Fielder is from a Tumbuka Tribe, born in 1963 in Rumphu District. She grew up in a rural village at a time when it was very difficult for girl children to proceed with education. In her patrilineal culture, it was common for parents to marry off girl children in exchange for bride price. She went against this odd by proceeding with her education.

After completing her Primary Education at Luviri LEA School in in 1979, she proceeded to Marymount Girls Secondary School where she got a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) in 1983. This secondary school was a national school where only ‘above average’ students went to. This was an out of ordinary experience for her as not many children in this area went to such schools. Since she came from poor parents, she could not afford to pay school fees. Her elder sister Alice Mkandawire, paid a third of the fees and the rest was paid by the Malawi Government scholarship fund. Rachel Fiedler became one of the few girls in the area to go to the University of Malawi. She first went to, Bunda College of Agriculture where she attained a Diploma in Agriculture in 1986. This was against her wish as she wanted to be a teacher. After graduation, she

joined Campus Crusade for Christ in 1986, which did not promise a salary but some stipend based on whether Christians had paid the organisation or not. It was also abnormal that after her poor parents expected her to get a job that would bring money to them, she did the contrary.

## **Accessing Higher Education in the Context of Marriage**

Marriage in Malawi has sometimes become a barrier for women in Africa. Rachel Fiedler continued to access education as a married person. In 1987, she got married to Jande Banda, a Chewa from Kasungu. This was flawed upon by her Tumbuka relatives that discouraged girls from marrying from the tribe. He was also employed with the Campus Crusade for Christ. In the same year, Rachel Fiedler (Banda then) did a 6 months theological training in Discipleship. Her parents liked the idea because she did the training in Swaziland. This brought pride to them as there were few in those days who went abroad for training. It is this training that inspired her to do more theological training.

In 1991, she together with her husband left Campus Crusade for Christ and she taught at Zomba Private Primary School. This was not normal for a graduate to teach at primary school but because it took time to get employed with the Ministry of education, she taught at this place to get income for her family. In 1992, she was employed by the Ministry of Education and taught at Mulunguzi Secondary School in Zomba. Her husband joined the Malawi Examination Board in the same District. In 1993, she joined Bwaila Secondary School in Lilongwe, following her husband who joined the Malawi Institute of Education based in the city.

In 1994 she went for a University Certificate of Education (UCE) at the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. It was an out of ordinary experience because, she only could go for this training because the person who was supposed to go, turned down the offer. This was a one-year course to help her in the teaching profession. Her love for theology made her to join Zomba Theological College to study Theology and Religious Studies in 1995. This was out of ordinary because she had three children to look after at this time. She also enrolled in a first level class as a mature student while she already had a diploma in Agriculture. It was also not ordinary for a member of Baptist Convention Church to study Theology in this institution. She became the first private student that was not sent by a church. She was one of the two ladies in her class.

She continued to follow her husband and discontinued her training at Zomba theological College when her husband went to study in Australia. After one and a half academic years, she transferred to Canberra College of Theology to join her husband. It is only at this time when her husband followed her. Her husband finished training in 1997 but she still had 6 months to finish her course. Her husband waited for her until she received her Bachelor of Theology degree in 1998. In the same year, she joined Chancellor College again for a Master's degree programme in Theology and Religious Studies which she obtained in 2001.

### **Accessing education as a Widow and being Remarried**

In 1999, November, her husband Jande Banda died. This was traumatic. She was only 36 years of age and her children were 11, 9, and 5 years old. Here, she also did something out of the ordinary by remarrying to a German, Klaus Fiedler. This was rare for African women and men to marry white people. What was also out of the ordinary was that she married someone 20 years older than her. Again, the family of the late husband did not object to this marriage. She married Klaus in 2001 less than two years after death of her first husband. This was also not ordinary. In African culture a woman is expected to show that she loved her husband by delaying remarriage or preferably by not remarrying. From 2002 to 2007 she started working on her PhD in Church History with Chancellor College, the University of Malawi and then transferred her candidature to University of the Free State in 2008 where she received her PhD in Church history and Polity in 2011.

### **Her Work with the Church**

She planted two Baptist churches but she considers herself not a pastor. Her husband carried out the role of administering the sacraments in the churches. She also served as a leader in the church women group of her local church as regional coordinator in the South East region.

### **Her University Work Experience**

Rachel Fiedler started her career at a university as a part-time lecturer in Church History and New Testament in the University of Malawi, Chancellor College (2002-2007). She also acted as an Undergraduate and Post-

Graduate Research Supervisor. For a year from 2004-2005 she served as Lecturer in Church History (part-time) at Zambezi College of Ministry. From 2008 to date, she is working with Mzuzu University teaching different courses based on needs of the department and the society and holding different responsibilities. In 2008 -2013 she was a Lecturer in Gender Studies and Church History. Then she became a Senior lecturer from 2013. She was promoted to Associate Professorship in 2017, She has also supervised a number of undergraduate and post graduate students' research work locally and internally. This included supervising students from other disciplines such as Education and of Transformative Community Development Studies. Internationally, she has been involved with the University of Carolina as Research Associate on gender and health and the University of the Free State (2011-2013). Outstanding in her research work is the theme of gender studies. Through these research activities she has publications that are not only visible in Malawi but also internationally. This includes publications in South African Based publications, European based publications and American based publications. At local level publications based on her PhD and MA, have found outlet in Kachere Series, a Publishing wing of the Theology and Religious Studies Department of Chancellor College now the University of Malawi and in Mzuzu University Press. Through the African Books Collective (Oxford) these are also available and promoted internationally. At the Mzuzu University among other things, she will be remembered as having developed Gender and Theology Studies Curriculum as follows: BTRS 1202 Religion and Feminist Theology, BTRS 2305 African Feminist Theology, BTRS 3307 Gender and Human Rights and BTRS 4803 Gender and Development. Her expertise has also been enhanced through attending a number of gender conferences both local and internal. She has also served as a Guest Lecturer in 2002 at UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa and Bible Institute of South Africa, Cape Town.

### **Civic or Public Engagement**

Rachael NyaGondwe Fielder as a social worker, her involvement with the community is visible in her life. She has served as an Honorary Director of Lydia Project in Zomba since 1998. This project has given birth to Lydia Action in 2021. It has implemented a number of projects within the community such as sewing and tailoring, home based care, caring for the elderly, offering bursaries to secondary school students and taking

care of Baptist pastors' widows across the nation of Malawi and the aged pastors. Another area of engagement has been in the field of producing teaching resources for gender, health and education advocacy. The following are examples:

(a) Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Chenjerani. Nthenda ya Edzi Ilikodi*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2006, 2007. Translated from the original Chichewa into English as: *Be Careful. Aids is Real*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2006, and into Chitumbuka as: *Tichenjere! Edzi Yiriko Nadi*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2007.

(b) Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *Tipewe kwa Azamba, Tinke ku Chipatala*, Zomba: Lydia Pr, 2008. This booklet is used to educated people to use hospitals and clinics for maternity services and not traditional birth attendants. It shows further the concern that Rachel has on issues that affect women.

Studies have shown that maternal deaths was more likely with deliveries conducted by traditional birth attendants than with a skilled attendant at a health facility. The Malawi Government changed its policy in 2007 on the roles of traditional birth attendants that they are to refer mothers to the nearest hospital or clinic. Her writing is further complementing government effort to bring awareness of the benefits of using health facilities.

## Publications

An important aspect of university life and for academicians is publication. Actually, promotion in most Universities is based on publication. There is even a saying which goes Publish or Perish, popularly known in Malawi as PP. Rachael NyaGondwe Fielder has researched and published widely and her work appears in form of books, articles and booklets. This is a legacy that will stay with the World for ever and is a big contribution to knowledge. A list of her research and publication is provided in the reference section and will help us to understand her theology, area of interest and contribution in the Circle.

## Stepping Stones for Circle Stars

Doing theology should be born out of experience. Rachel Fiedler has concentrated on issues that concern women. As a woman who has come against many odds, her story inspires women theologians to take their

context seriously in building theologies. This is consistent with the aim of the Circle. The idea is to expose and advocate issues that affect women as a way of improving their situation. Two major themes that can be captured in her publications are women and culture. Some of the issues that she has highlighted include the following: challenges for theological education for women, Pastors wives and Patriarchy; Women pastors, Initiation ceremonies and girls' rights. Her writing is a typical example of African Women's theologies, distinct type of theology but belonging to a wider family of feminist theology which is a branch of Liberation theology. One characteristic of liberation theology and more so of African Women's' theology is its commitment to the emancipation of women both in the church and in the society.

Centering on the theme of Women and culture, Rachel Fiedler understands that the freedoms that women enjoy in the community are affected by the traditional culture, they live in among different exciting Christian cultures which also have various biblical interpretations regarding the position of women in the church and in the society. It is also true that freedoms that women enjoy have progressed over time, in tune with increased understanding of church polity and doctrine influenced by local and global changes. She made this observation in her book *Women of the Bible and Culture. Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*. She has also contributed to the writing up of the History of the Circle in Africa as well as the Circle chapter in Malawi. She begins the history with Mercy Amba Oduyoye as a mother and leader of the Circle. However, Rachel Fiedler acknowledges that the Circle as an African Baby was born in an ecumenical surrounding, whereby other liberation movements have contributed and coloured the theology of the Circle.

The lesson from Rachel's story is that if one has a passion for higher theological training, she must use barriers as stepping stones towards excellence. Rachel Fiedler, went far with theological training regardless of the odds that were against her. She earned education in an environment that did not promote education of girl children. She continued with education regardless that she lost a husband and went through culturally ridden barriers of getting remarried. She also was not shy to expose herself to new horizons of reflections. She did not only research and write within the discipline of Theology but in conversation with others as well. We belong to a global world and we must embrace this reality by developing theologies that do not only speak to our discipline but beyond.

## CONCLUSION

Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler has taught at different levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. This has enriched her teaching experience. The lady has also published widely. of special significance is her PhD research which has resulted in to a book; "A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989-2007), Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2017. She has also made a big impact in the Institution that she is teaching Theology by engineering the development of courses on gender studies and Theology and for their inclusion in the Theology and Religious Studies Curriculum such as Religion and Feminist Theology, African Feminist Theology, Gender and Human Rights and Gender and Development, The chapter has outlined the particular themes of Rachel Fiedler's theology by highlighting her line of thinking that challenged patriarchy or societal expectations then.

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## 19 | Theological Journeys of Omega Bula - A Zambian Theologian

*Nelly Mwale*

### **Abstract**

Demonstrating the contributions of women towards theologies of liberation in Southern Africa, this chapter analyses the theological journeys of Omega Bula. It draws on content analysis of published work on Omega Bula on her journey as a Zambian woman theologian engaged in social and economic justice. Situated in the African theologies' framework as characterised by a focus on social advocacy and doing service in the community, the chapter shows that Omega's theological engagement was shaped by her historical, religio-cultural, and economic context, which negatively affected people's wellbeing, women, and the Earth. The chapter further shows that Omega's theological journeys were centred on fostering a theology which she termed a theology of the promotion of an economy of life in which scripture, stories and experiences were used as empowering tools for justice. Her theology was, among other things, aimed at fostering a just economic system which dignified people (in a context where the free-market system was based on domination and exploitation), working in solidarity with women within and outside the churches and promoting the church's response to the call for justice in the economy and the Earth in concrete ways. As such, her theology addressed capitalism, patriarchy, the environmental crisis, and other related social factors in practical ways and contributed to generating liberative theologies. The chapter contributes to the development of an African feminist liberative historiography in Southern Africa from the Zambian context by drawing practical lessons for women to theologise in the spaces where they live and work to contribute to the liberation of their communities and beyond.

**Keywords:** Liberation theology, theological journey, social and economic justice, Zambia, and Omega Bula

## Introduction

Although women have contributed to the creation of liberative theologies, their contributions are not adequately addressed in scholarship. Demonstrating the contributions of women towards theologies of liberation in Southern Africa, this chapter explores the theological journeys of Omega Bula. This chapter is also in honour of Omega, who died on January 31, 2023 after a battle with cancer. The concept of theological journey is used to refer to the work of Omega in her career as a social worker and lay theologian. The chapter addresses the following research question, “how did Omega Bula contribute towards theologies of liberation in her theological journeys”? This research question is situated in the wider discourses of the quest to trail the theological contributions of women of the Circle<sup>1</sup> in faith-related and ecumenical spaces.

The chapter purposively focuses on Omega Bula, a Zambian Theologian and a Circle matriarch who was engaged in social and economic justice to show her contributions to liberative theologies developed by women in the Circle from the Zambian context. Bula’s theological journeys are also closely aligned with the narrative of Mbuya Nehanda, the Zimbabwean spiritual freedom fighter who showcases a long-standing tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in Southern Africa. The chapter argues that women have consistently and uniquely shaped the fight against all forms of injustice by generating unique theologies grounded in their local context. It is therefore deemed significant for contributing to the development of an African feminist liberative historiography in Southern Africa from the Zambian context by drawing practical lessons for women to theologise in the spaces where they live and work to contribute to the liberation of their communities and beyond. The chapter unfolds by highlighting the approach to theory and method before engaging with Omega Bula’s work.

## Approach to theory and methods

The chapter draws on content analysis of published work on Omega Bula on her theological journeys. It specifically employs a qualitative narrative

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<sup>1</sup> It is an interfaith association that aims at producing theological literature by encouraging and mentoring women to research, write, and publish in the wide scope of religion and culture (Njoroge 2005).

design, particularly a biographical study. A biographical study is understood as a “form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person's life,” (Creswell 2006:55) Creswell (2007) explains that narrative research focuses on studying one or two individuals, gathers data through the collection of their stories, and reports individual experiences. As opposed to giving an account of her full biography, this chapter only focuses on selected highlights of her life story concerning her contributions to liberative theologies through her theological engagement. Her biography could be read elsewhere (Mulenga-Kaunda, forthcoming).

Maseno (2021:1) explains that African women's theology has a commitment to the emancipation of women and that it covers several themes, including ecclesiology, hospitality, community, spirituality, sacrifice, ecology, and missiology.” She adds that African women's theology incorporates experiences of African women in their perspectives while analysing women's subordination. (2021:1). In this regard, it was assumed that Omega's narrative engages with the issues that are at the core of African women theologies. Given that narratives may be guided by a theoretical lens such as a feminist one to report the stories of women, this chapter is grounded in the African women theologies' framework as characterised by a focus on social advocacy and doing service in the community.

African women's theologies draw on different sources as shaped by their context. For example, African religio-cultural heritage provides insights that are appropriated by African women theologians (Maseno, 2021). These include various written sources (publications) from African women's theologians within the Circle (Pemberton, 2003). Kanyoro (2001:158-180) also adds that the “Christian feminist movement of the west is another source for African women's theology which is used to challenge cultural socialisation and reject the view the women's and men's roles have either been fixed by the creator or culture.”

According to Oduyoye (2001), African women's theology draws much from women's experience. Therefore, the source of African women's theology is African women's experience. These experiences cut across different issues such as the exploitation of workers, sexual abuse and oppression in the church and society as a whole (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2001; Maseno, 2021). The Bible is also central for African women theologians. However, the Bible cannot be the only norm because, “any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless” (Oduyoye, 2001:12). It is also acknowledged

that African women's theological reflections are also informed by other sources such as stories, folklores and legends (Oduyoye, 1996), in which case, stories are a source for theology.

The chapter assumes that these sources enable African women to develop liberative theologies in their own contexts. Of the many tenets of African women theologies, the chapter engages more with commitment to the emancipation of women as characterised by a focus on social advocacy and doing service in the community in Omega's narrative.

### **Omega Bula's Theological Journey**

Omega Bula is a woman of different descriptions, given her roles in different spheres and contexts. For example, she is often described as a Zambian theologian and former director of the Women's desk in the All-Africa Conference of Churches (Nairobi), a former programme director at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Kitwe and an instrumental person in the formation of the Association of Christian Lay Centres in Africa (Bula, 1993). She also served as the executive minister or Ecumenical Officer for the Justice Global and Ecumenical Relations in the United Church of Canada (Mukasa, 2005). In tracing the development of the Circle, Fiedler (2017:172) further identifies Omega Bula as one of the first cohorts of the Circle in Zambia, alongside Peggy Mulambya Kabonde and Juliet Matembo. Fiedler (2017:68) identifies Omega as a founding member of the Zambia local chapter and describes her as a social worker by profession who, by 2000, worked at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation. These descriptions are important as they shed light on the different roles Omega played in her career in different contexts. The numerous descriptions of Omega were even more pronounced during her death as she was mourned on the continent and beyond. For example, The United Church of Canada News (3 February 2023: n.p) described her as an incomparable legacy of ecumenical leadership in the struggle for racial, gender, economic and social justice in Zambia, the African continent, in United Church of Canada, and globally. The World Communion of Reformed Churches also remembered her as an active contributor to gender justice and economic and ecological justice work (Tanis, 4 February 2023). To the Circle, she was a seasoned ecumenist, gender activist and icon of justice (Circle 2023).

Her theological journeys are seen through her theological contexts, which informed her work, the sources used in her work and the aim of

her theological engagement, contributions of her theological journeys and emerging lessons.

### ***Her Context***

Growing up in the colonial period, Omega's theological engagement was shaped by her historical, religio-cultural, and economic context. Studies have proven that the colonial environment negatively affects the well-being of people, women and the planet. For example, studies of women's work during the colonial period often show that women lost power and economic autonomy with the arrival of cash crops and women's exclusion from the global marketplace (Sheldon, 2018). This dynamic varied from place to place as, in some areas, the introduction of cash crops led to changes in women's agricultural work and in men's and women's control over land. The colonial authorities generally disregarded women's pre-colonial political activity, who turned exclusively to men when they established local political offices (Sheldon, 2018). Thus, throughout the colonial period, women continued to struggle for justice, and Omega experienced her own share of the women's struggles (as will be alluded to in the subsequent sections of the chapter).

Omega's post-independence context was characterised by a religio-cultural reality which negatively affected the well-being of women. Grounded in patriarchy, women continued to be excluded from public leadership of family, church and society, most especially from decision making and political leadership positions. As stated by Rayah (2007), women subordination entails the subjection of women by men in all forms, which makes women suffer the impact of gender relations that often place them firmly in a position of political, economic and social disadvantage in society. As lamented by Kabonde-Mulambya (2014), despite the fact that women are the majority in the church, leadership structures of the church continue to be dominated by men, both clergy and laity; hence, few women are represented in decision making bodies of the church. She adds that the inequality inherited from the gender -insensitive political structures of the wider society has found its way in the church, a scenario that affirms that so often the church mimics society rather setting an example for it (Kabonde-Mulambya, 2014). As such, gender relations are characterised by a series of contradictions as while women found a presence in public life in post-independent Zambia, considerable obstacles persisted and made it difficult for them to attain equality with men (Mwale and Chita, 2021:38). The Zambia National

Gender policy (2014), also affirms that even in the 2010s, women continued to lag behind their male counterparts in all spheres of national development. These gender imbalances or injustices in her context became the focus of her theological engagement as will be discussed later in the chapter.

Becoming a prominent theological voice in the 1990s, her context was further characterised by the socio-economic meltdown, which had implications for women and the world. In this case, Zambia adopted a multi-party system of democratic governance in 1991, which coincided with failing socio-economic trends owing to a drop in oil and copper prices. This forced Zambia to start borrowing heavily from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The attempts to improve the economic situation as prescribed by these agencies did not yield meaningful results (Mwale, 2020). The 1990s were therefore characterised by the process of economic restructuring through the Structural Adjustment Plan (SAP). This impacted negatively on Zambia's socio-economic life as privatisation of the national and parastatal companies resulted in the retrenchment of many workers from formal employment (Saluseki, 2000). Neo-liberalisation resulted in inequalities and contributed to social divisions between the haves and have-nots (Mwale, 2018; 2020). Human rights and democracy, gender, population growth, environmental concerns, health (including drug abuse) and HIV and AIDS consequently became topical national issues.

Women were adversely affected by the economic meltdown, as observed by Lugalla (1995) that throughout Africa, the repercussions of SAPs have been exacerbated by women's subordination within the household and that the erosion of real incomes and increased poverty have had a devastating effect on women and children. Similarly, the liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s had an impact on the Earth. According to the Environmental Council of Zambia (2000), the liberalisation of the Zambian economy contributed to the rate of ecological degradation in the country. This was through the high electricity tariffs and reduction of the fiscal support to the forestry department, which heightened deforestation levels. Additionally, the economic emphasis on agribusiness resulted in the use of mechanised commercial farming that is dependent on chemicals which are hazardous to ecology (Mwale, 2021:150). As such, women and the Earth were both vulnerable in ways which shaped Bula's theological journeys.

### ***Her Sources***

Omega utilised different sources to theologise, which are largely shaped by her context (colonial and post-colonial socio-political environment). One of the sources relates to experiences. For example, she noted that women's participation in the church and society revealed that women participated in ways that kept them close to the internalised self-understanding. 'In all my experiences, I have been struck by the rich potential of African women for participation in ministry, their willingness despite their heavy burdens, their selflessness in both financial and energy resources despite the deprivations they suffer (Bula, 1993:247). Thus, her experiences of women subordination despite their potential became a source of her theological engagement which made her advocate for women participation in the church and economic life. As affirmed by Oduyoye (2001), African women's theology draws much from women's experiences in their context as they do not write theology that is detached from their daily living. These experiences include those of African women theologians themselves or those that they have heard from the experiences of others. In the case of Omega, the experiences were both her own and those experienced by others in her context.

Omega also drew on stories to theologise. For example, in the wake of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which negatively affected women, stories from Ghana, Zambia and Uganda were used to depict the impact of the SAPs on African women (Bula, 1992). It was observed that cutbacks in social services resulted in a lack of medicine in government hospitals and lack of transport for the sale of goods. Currency devaluations also made prices skyrocket while the removal of subsidies on essential commodities put these out of the reach of many. Within this context, it was affirmed that African women responded to these crises by banding together to form collectives and co-operatives and sharpening their consciousness regarding the absolute necessity of their participation in political and economic structures. As such, Omega advocated for a theology that supported women in their struggle (Bula, 1992). Drawing on stories for theological engagement is in line with the conclusion drawn by Oduyoye (1996) that African women theological reflections are also informed by other sources such as stories, folklores and legends.

She was also in conversation with scholars from the West in her quest for economic justice. For example, she engaged Paulo Freire's theorisation on education for liberation as an important tool for working out a commitment to empower the powerless, the marginalised, the hungry

and those excluded by systems of injustice. She acknowledged that while not all agreed with Paulo's metaphors:

those like myself who grew up struggling against colonialism, racism and apartheid, patriarchy, economic marginalisation etc find meaning and inspiration in this approach and understanding of education. It gave people like me energy that fuelled our resistance to domination. It worked to raise the consciousness of the poor and marginalised with whom Paulo was engaged in this pedagogical praxis (Bula, 2005:252).

Maseno (2021) and Kanyoro (2001) agree that liberative discourses of the west are also sources for African women's theology which is used to challenge cultural socialisation. Most importantly, it is not all discourses of the West, but those that are centred on the concerns of justice. In this regard, Bula calls for liberative education that could reject all manner of injustice. As such, her selective engagement with ideas from the West portray a long contested place of African women in theology and the wider church on one hand, and shows that women do create own theologies which are adapted to the realities of their context, on the other. Although this chapter has the limitation of drawing parallels between the West and African theologies, including the emerging critique of the West and African feminism, it can be stated that the notions of women theologies in both the local and outside context could have had a bearing on the liberative theology advanced by Omega. This is also clearly seen in the way she blends aspects from the west and Africa to theologise.

Bula also tapped into scripture to theologise. For example, she argued that "anything that denies God's people the realisation of abundant life needs to be transformed so that victims can find healing. This is Christ's mission: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)" (Bula, 2005:189). Other scripture passages which she utilised include Isaiah 58:6 which she viewed as a call to break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice and let the oppressed go free (Bula, 2005). This was in relation to the Accra Confession on Justice in the Economy and the Earth. As observed by Oduyoye (2001), the Bible is central in African women theologians' theologising (Oduyoye, 2001:12). Omega also appropriates Mary as a model for women's participation in mission by way of:

helping our men to see that our struggle is a communal one, not just a women's struggle, and that in Christ we are one body, and that if one member suffers then the whole body suffers; accepting to do the untraditional things because we are convinced that God acts through us; we

are chosen, we are on mission to renew the old, to bring new vision and hope; seeing that there is power in powerlessness and vulnerability, and that sisterhood and solidarity with other women is needed in all our struggles. Our liberation is bound up with that of others; realising that dialogue and healing is taking place, even in small places and in small ways; recognising that there are signs of solidarity between men and women based on our common struggle for survival; seeing that there is creativity in problem-solving, in overcoming passivity and hopelessness; questioning the status quo: That what is and used to be can change (Bula, 1992:251).

While Omega's sources are in line with those in existing literature, her own career as a social worker could not be detached from the issues which she sought to address.

### **The aims of Bula's Theological Discourses**

Bula's contribution to liberative theology was centred on fostering a theology which she termed a theology of the promotion of an economy of life. This was because of the realisation that questions of justice and sustainable development and people's role in it emerge in the search for abundant life (Bula, 2005). As such, she advocated for an empowering education that utilised participatory methodologies. For example, she advocated for women participation in the life of the church. She argued that much of the educational work in the churches is done by women, hence a pedagogy that ignores the ways in which women learn and share their stories, would not be helpful in engaging most people in the pews, who are women (Bula, 2005:254).

Omega also situated the role of theological education and its motivation in the context of gender-based injustice and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in communities. Kim (2003) recounted that Omega assisted Theological Education by Extension in Zambia (TEEZ) to articulate theological motivations and personal starting points for empowering women and ending SGBV. This was significant for enabling TEEZ to effectively work for Gender Justice through the use of technological resources as tools. By making our materials available electronically, TEEZ hoped to empower people and let them learn about Gender Justice through technology (Kim, 2013).

She advocated for liberative education centred on justice. In the context of Empire, Bula, emphasised that education for justice ought to move

actors beyond the moral and ethical approach that attracts actions of charity to the poor, leaving the structures of injustice that create poverty intact (Bula, 2005). In the wake of the Accra confession, she noted that the teaching of a “prophetic and liberating statement” such as the Accra Confession, called for a liberation pedagogy rooted in a postcolonial analysis as the Accra confession had implications for ecumenical learning and the empowerment of local communities (Bula, 2005:251). Since there were individuals richer than many states: the sum total of the wealth of the 15 richest people in the world being greater than the GNP of all the sub-Saharan African countries (Ramonet, 2004:6), over 375 WARC General Council delegates representing 164 member-churches from around the world confessed their faith against systemic injustice in the economy and the Earth. They further committed themselves to challenge the world order, as a matter of faith, and to change it to God’s economy in the service of life for all (Mateus, 2005). Bula contributed to this conversation by calling for new ways of using education for justice in that justice could only be realised if the systems were transformed.

Bula’s stance on liberative education could be understood in relation to her theology which was, among other things, aimed at fostering a just economic system that dignified people (in a context where the free-market system was based on domination and exploitation), working in solidarity with women within and outside the churches and promoting the church’s response to the call for justice in the economy and the Earth in concrete ways.

She appropriated mission to women’s participation in healing, restoring wholeness to the broken world, and in recovering abundant life so that all could become human again. This healing was extended to all aspects of life: spiritual, physical sociocultural and political. For example, she stood for sustainable agriculture. She observed that life-killing elements operating under the framework of economic globalisation (specifically, international, and corporate interests and entities) farmers were forced to conform to farming practices that damaged and destroyed nature and local communities. She critiqued the dominant development model of agriculture (corporate- and market-driven) which was capital- intensive, export-oriented and monocultural, with profit as its motive and compelled farmers to use GMO seeds, pesticides, chemical fertilisers, and automation. Such methods led to soil degradation, loss of indigenous seeds and biodiversity, biopiracy and concentration of lands in the hands

of the few and restricted diversity of agriculture, favouring the food patterns that are being dictated by fast-food companies. Park, Ortega and Bula (2005:280) observed that conventional agriculture defied all the values that uphold communitarian living. As such, this trend needed to be reversed as life-killing agriculture needed to be altered into life-giving agriculture for sustainable life on the planet Earth. As such, her theology addressed capitalism, patriarchy, the environmental crisis, and other related social factors in practical ways and in turn contributed to generating liberative theologies for mother earth.

### **Contributions of her Theological Journeys and Emerging Lessons**

Her theological discourses had implications for transforming social ills and contributing to knowledge creation and practice. In relation to practice, she was instrumental in the formation of the Association of Christian Lay Centres in Africa as director at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Kitwe, Zambia. This is closely related to the ecumenical contributions of the Circle in that despite being excluded from church leadership for a long time, African women theologians were contributing to shape ecumenical theology (Phiri, 2005).

She also advanced the need for African church women to examine the struggle for justice, peace, and integrity of creation from women's perspective in her capacity and role as programme director of the women's desk in the All-Africa Conference of Churches (Nairobi). Her theological contributions affirm that African women's theologies are grounded in the local context and are centred on the transformation of women, the vulnerable and mother Earth. As Hinga (1996:28) concluded, African women's theology is a protest against women's forced silence and a wakeup call to African women to rise and fight against the forces of injustice surrounding them.

As executive minister for Global Justice and Ecumenical Relations unit of the United Church of Canada, Bula advocated for humanity's responsibility within the wider Earth community by connecting wealth creation, poverty, and ecological justice. She, therefore, contributed to African women's theologies through her advocacy for a holistic justice. This not only resonates with eco-feminist principles but is also in line with the African women theologies' focus on the commitment to the emancipation of women and social advocacy. This is affirmed by Haddad (2013:13)

who observes that African women theologies are characterised by a focus on social advocacy, doing service in the community, valuing women's experiences through narratives and specificity of experience. Other women theologians such as Phiri and Sarojini (2010:93) also affirm that African women theologians seek solidarity with those who suffer marginalisation of every kind, trying to understand, analyse and change the systems of domination and abuse of power.

Her theological journey was not only in leadership but also in publications (in line with her core duties). For example, her publication while a programme officer of "Selfhood of the Church-Women" in the All-Africa Conference of Churches, Nairobi, Kenya on women in mission was a contribution not only to knowledge creation but also to practical ways in which women could make a difference in healing the world holistically. Similarly, her other publications (1992, 1993, 2005) offered solutions to the social, economic, and environmental, crises which in turn liberate humanity. Bula contributed to realising the aspirations of the Circle through publications as observed by Ayanga (2016:1) that the "main objective of the Circle is 'to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their own experience of religion and culture on this continent. In this regard, the Circle has been and continues to be the voice for and on behalf of the African woman in religion, culture, and theology.'" Her use of publications to theologise affirms how different forms of media have become an outlet for discourses of religion and gender (Mwale, 2019).

Her theological contributions not only challenged the dominant theologies which disadvantaged the poor, women and the Earth but were also in line with theologies of life and compassion as advocated by Prince Dibeela and Musa Dube, among others. For example, amid gender injustice, disease and the environmental crisis, hope and compassion are identified as critical to promoting human life and instilling hope. Through her engagement with discourses which disempower women and contribute to the environmental crisis in her everyday work and publications, Omega could be said to have contributed to liberating women. As argued by African theologians with reference to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, a theology of life (Dibeela, 2007) and theology of compassion (Dube, 2007) remained potential tools for theologising. Bula voiced out against patriarchy through her constant emphasis on the participation of women in public life and in the church as affirmed by Dube (2016) that a majority of African women theologians' voice against how African culture finds

hideout in similar biblical patriarchal culture. Bula's contribution to liberative theologies can also be seen through her quest for empowerment and gender equality as observed by NyaGondwe Fiedler (2017) that the goal of Circle theology is to promote women's empowerment and gender equality and as such, its theologies are aimed at empowering women and promoting equality in religion and society.

Her theological journeys further demonstrate that contributions to liberative theology can be generated by African women theologians from wherever they are. She used her different work positions to address the ills that dehumanise and enslave women and the Earth. NyaGondwe Fiedler (2017) observed that Circle theologies are formed in the context of African culture and religion. Thus, the efforts of Bula are closely situated in the transformation of African women's theologies.

Her narrative also brings forth lessons centred on collaboration for the good of humanity. For example, through her different networks in her career, she proposed and applied methodologies which could still be used by future African women theologians. For example, participatory methods and education for justice are key tools which can make a difference in the lives of women, the vulnerable and the Earth. Given Omega's long engagement in social and economic justice work, her theological journeys show that women have consistently and uniquely shaped the fight for all forms of injustice by generating unique theologies grounded in their local context.

## **CONCLUSION**

In relation to the research question on how Omega Bula contributed towards theologies of liberation in her theological journey, the chapter concludes that Omega used her workspace to theologise. Her historical, religio-cultural, and economic context (which negatively affected people's wellbeing, women, and the Earth) shaped her theological journeys. As such, she contributed to liberative theologies by fostering a theology which promoted an economy of life in which scripture, stories and experiences were used as empowering tools for justice. Her theology aimed to promote a just economic system which dignified people, working in

solidarity with women within and outside the churches and promoting the church's response to the call for justice in the economy and the Earth in concrete ways. Her narrative not only enriches African feminist liberative historiography in Southern Africa from the Zambian context but also demonstrates the potential for theologising in the spaces where women live and work in order to contribute to the liberation of their communities and the Earth.

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## 20 | The Theological Journey of Peggy Mulambya Kabonde:

The First Black Female General Secretary  
of the United Church of Zambia

*Bridget Nonde Masaiti-Mukuka*

*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;  
before you were born I sanctified you;  
I ordained you a prophet to the nations”.*

(Jeremiah 1:5)

### Abstract

This article sets out to retrieve the theological history of Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde who was the first black female to be appointed as General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia. It attempts a survey of African Women’s Theology which highlights some theological sources used by Peggy. The article concerns Peggy’s personal narratives that include her social and religio-cultural backgrounds. Findings from the interviews highlight how colonialism, power, patriarchy, culture, ageism, gender and religion intersects in the theological journey of Peggy. By focusing on Peggy as the first female General Secretary of UCZ, the article outlines the theological challenges and achievements she encountered. The article explains how her theological ideas challenge and transforms patriarchy, colonialism, gender, culture and the subordination of women in the church. This article contributes to the emergent literature on the concept of intersectionality and this will be used as a theoretical framework. Data in this article is drawn from secondary research sources, through academic journals, scholarly books, online publications and the face-to-face interviews that the author had with Peggy on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2020 and 18<sup>th</sup> August, 2022 respectively.

**Keywords:** African Women’s Theology, Power, Intersectionality

## Introduction

In as much as the article sets out to outline the theological-life journey of Rev. Dr. Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde, it will address issues of power dynamics in terms of her position in the church. However, before bringing forth the many experiences of Peggy, the article outlines, briefly, the context and the religiosity of the Zambian people in the Reformed Church of Zambia (RCZ) and the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) respectively.

The article entices and widens the perspective of the reader on African Women's Theology and its relationship with other postcolonial African theologies. To achieve this objective, the article poses the following questions: who is Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde? What are some of the challenges experienced by Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde during her historical and theological journeys as a reverend in the postcolonial United Church of Zambia (UCZ)? To answer the question, the article analyzes the narrative or responses of Peggy who was available for interviews. The section below discusses briefly, some experiences of the ordained women in the Reformed Church of Zambia (RCZ) and the United Church of Zambia (UCZ).

## Post-Colonial Women and the Church in Zambia

Kangwa (2017:96) observes that the history of Christianity in Africa reflects androcentric preoccupations because a lot of stories about women who contributed to the growth of Christianity have been marginalized. Kangwa sees that the names of many women who have contributed to the growth of the church, such as Alice Mulenga Lenshina<sup>1</sup> in Zambia

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Mulenga Lenshina, initiated her own African Indigenous Church (AIC) in Zambia in 1958. Her church was called the Lumpa Church. Lenshina was the first woman to protest and challenge the missionary's preaching, the colonial powers, as well as the Kaunda regime. Lenshina claimed to have died and risen again. In her death, she claimed she saw Jesus Christ, who told her to go back to life and tell the people that "Jesus is coming again". At that time, Lenshina knew nothing about reading the Bible (For more information see Hinfelaar, 1994:73; Masaiti, 2017). It is believed that some of the accusations alleged against her by the Kaunda regime had no foundation. For example, "Lenshina was accused of using false doctrines, such as advising her members to drink their own urine so as to cleanse themselves. They said she also advised her members to climb tall trees and let go of themselves, so that the

are mentioned without giving positive details of their contributions. In many cases, the narrations on Lenshina are viewed negatively. For example, many of us received stories of how Lenshina forcefully made her followers drink her own urine. It is through face-to-face interviews with Lenshina's followers that one gets to uncover the truth about Lenshina's experiences as a woman ordained by God.

It is through these backgrounds that many mainline churches in Zambia were not ready to ordain women. Mulowa (2022:226), an ordained woman in the Reformed Church in Zambia, explains how her church celebrated her 100 years of existence without any ordained woman on board. According to Mulowa (2022:228),

by the year 2000, the topic on women's ordination became a hot debate. Proposals to allow women into ministry were sent to synod...After careful debate and reflection, with a majority vote, the 21<sup>st</sup> synod conference at Mphangwe congregation held [from] 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 2000, took up the challenge of allowing women into the ministry of word and sacrament.

The Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) is also one of the mainline churches in Zambia. The church faced a lot of challenges in ordaining women into ministry and is still facing many problems when it comes to including women in leadership positions. Additionally, Mukuka (2022:188) shares how she broke "...the barriers of patriarchy in the ecclesiastical setup, [by] being the first female Bishop in the United Church of Zambia, 37 years after the church's inception [in 1965]". She recalls that her election to the position of Bishop in 2002 came with enormous challenges and opposition from her male partners. Mukuka received a lot of encouragement from many women. She echoes that her experience in ministry "...had actually exposed how deeply the patriarchal and sexist practices were embedded in the church" (Mukuka, 2022:198). Stories from women in ministry are a healing to young women who are joining ministry. Mukuka's and Mulowa's stories are healing and empowering stories to those women who are experiencing marginalization in the church today, and to those who intend telling their experiences but do not have an idea where they can start from. The following section gives the historical-background of Rev. Dr. Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde.

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angels of God would come down and save them. It was believed that many people died from this act". (See Mwamba, 2020).

## Who is Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde?

Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde is a Zambian woman. She is a black woman whose purpose has been to motivate and empower female lay and clergy in the church. Her biological parents are both Zambians. She was born on 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1961, in Nchanga North Hospital in Chingola. Chingola is one of the towns on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia. Peggy is the fifth child in the family of nine children, six boys and three girls. Her parents were committed Christians in the colonial Free State Church in Zambia. Her father was working in the mining industry in Chingola. Peggy recalls that “we were brought up in a home that practiced Christian values. My parents encouraged us to study and attend church services” (Interview. 2020). It was from this background that Peggy enjoyed the Sunday School Services. Peggy started her primary school at Kapopo Primary School. She later went to Twatasha Primary School. When Peggy was in grade 4, she joined the Girls Brigade Unit of the United Church of Zambia. As years went by, Peggy successfully passed her grade 7 examinations and went to Chikola Secondary. Peggy later moved to Mporokoso Secondary School where she wrote her form five examinations in 1981.

## Peggy’s Theological Journey

Peggy emphasizes that her favourite scripture is always at her finger-tips. This is Jeremiah 1 verse 5 which is cited at the beginning of this article. The scripture is self-explanatory since Peggy did not explain the reasons this scripture is her favourite. Peggy was an active member of the body of Christ at a young age in evangelism campaigns. It was during one of the evangelism campaigns led by Reverend Bill Hincks, who was the evangelism secretary by then, that Peggy received a calling. Bill Hincks travelled all the way to Mporokoso, the Northern Part of Zambia. Hincks was based at Kashinda Mission where he was carrying out evangelism campaigns. Peggy attended the evangelism campaign. Peggy recalls, “it was one of my life-changing campaigns because, coupled with my involvement in the choir, and being a Sunday School teacher, I remember very well that I received Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Saviour in this same campaign” (Interview. 2020). During this period, and as stated in the previous section, Peggy was a student at Mporokoso Secondary School where she completed her secondary education in 1981.

In 1983, Peggy applied to go and study at the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) Theological College. She found other three women who were already studying there. These were Reverend Violet Bredt-Sampa, Reverend Milandu Mundemba and Reverend Juliet Matembo. Peggy narrates that “I was the fourth woman student minister to be admitted to train as a minister of the Word and Sacraments” (Interview. 2020). Sharing her ministerial experience, Peggy explains that,

the first woman to be at the theological college was the Reverend Violet Bredt-Sampa, who was later sent to the University of Zambia as a Chaplain. Then there was Rev. Milandu Mundemba, then there was also Rev. Juliet Matembo and then myself – so you see, there was no woman minister on the Copperbelt Province at that time. And I was stationed right there. At first, it was very difficult for me, but when Reverend Mundemba was sent to the Copperbelt Province, I started getting excited to be in ministry, you know? (Interview. 2020).

Peggy got married to Mr Fred Kabonde in 1986, in the same year that she completed her ministerial studies. She was ordained as the Minister of Word and Sacrament. In 1986, Peggy was given her first congregation in Ndola. On her first appointment, Peggy was sent to the UCZ Kawama Congregation and other surrounding Congregations in Ndola. This was the time she had her first experience/s. Her experience at UCZ Kawama Congregation meant that Peggy could carry out mission work at the following UCZ congregations; Minsundu, Chipulukusu, Misaka, and Pamodzi Congregations, to mention but a few. The experience she got from these congregations strengthened her morally and spiritually in her theological-journeys. Peggy blended spiritually with all the congregations by attending the morning glory sessions with members on particular days. Peggy and Fred have four children. All of them are girls. Unfortunately, Fred answered God’s call in December 2020.

## **A Member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**

Peggy was introduced to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians by Ms Omega Bula<sup>2</sup>. In 1989, Ms Omega Bula identified Peggy

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Ms Omega Bula died on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, 2023 and was buried on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 2023 near her farm in Chisamba, Zambia. May Her Soul Rest in Eternal Peace.

as an emerging African woman theologian. Ms Bula appointed her to attend the first inauguration of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Ghana. According to Peggy, “It was also my first time to fly out of the country, you know”, (*smiling*). (Interview. 2020). In the same interview, Peggy explained that,

the aim of the first round of women was to bring the African women who had studied theology to be writing and publishing their experiences and the experiences of other women on the continent. It was hilarious to be part of this group of women and in our midst, was a renowned African male theologian; John Pobee who supported the work of the women, (Interview with Peggy. 2020).

Apart from being the minister of Word and Sacrament, Peggy held other positions in other institutions. “I began in 1994 when I was in my early 30s. I was appointed as the Director of women’s work...you know, they say, God calls the unqualified and qualifies them. The Women’s Christian Fellowship (WCF) elderly women did help me a lot. I had served as a minister in several congregations on the Copperbelt Presbytery” (Interview. 2020). Peggy was appointed as the Chaplain at the University of Zambia and also as a part-time Gender Officer. This involved incorporating women into the national activities and bringing women to be involved in some decision-making. Peggy recalls that at first some men never supported the gender program and only started supporting it after some time.

### **Specific features and uniqueness of the theology of Peggy as a Matriarch**

“My professional journey did not just end at the congregation”, explains Peggy, (Interview. 2020). Peggy enrolled at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation (MEF) where she obtained a diploma. She was one of the few black women in the country who secured a scholarship from the Methodist Church in Britain. “I was sent to school to study my Masters’ degree”, echos Peggy. Peggy was offered an honorary degree at the University of Cape Town. She graduated with a master’s degree at the University of Cape Town and returned to Zambia to continue with God’s work. In 2010, Peggy left the country again to pursue her PhD in Gender and Religion studies in Pietermaritzburg-South Africa at the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal. It was during this same period in 2010 that she was recalled

by the United Church of Zambia senior officials to help stand in as the interim General Secretary of the church. According to Peggy (2020),

...that was in 2010. But after only a few months of us being in South Africa, you know, I received a phone call that I was chosen to serve as Interim General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia for two years...that was from 2010 to 2012. I was not very ready for this position, because I did not know where I would start from, you know, especially that we had sold all our household goods and relocated to a foreign place...and we were just starting to settle in when this phone call came along. I...I didn't know what to do...I went to my supervisor and explained everything to her. (Posing the question to the *interviewer*) *You know how our supervisor is eh?* I explained to her that there has never been a female General Secretary in the United Church of Zambia...I even explained to her that at the moment our church is undergoing some financial problems. But you know Prof. Phiri? (Peggy asked the interviewer)? Being my Supervisor, she encouraged me by stating that "you never know what plans God has for your church...." She further reminded me that since my thesis discussed issues on women—I must go there with an open mind because this is not the church of human beings, but bear in mind that this is God's church (Interview. 2020).

In another interview with the researcher, Peggy explained how she found the financial position of the Church when she served as the General Secretary. She reckons that the church was experiencing extreme financial challenges when she took the position of General Secretary. In an interview with Peggy (2020), she stated:

And for sure when I came here as an Interim, I served as the Interim General Secretary for Two years. And for sure, there were problems... (*Holding her head and speaking out*) Jesus Christ! ...there was no money in the church—But you know, to cut the long story short... God as God-self, makes a way where there is no way. We started writing to many of the UCZ partner churches, explaining our problems...we found ourselves where to place our heads... and in 2014 after tough competitions, I was elected as the new General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia. The question I kept asking myself was: are we doing something that is fine—but God was saying, 'it is not you—it is God working' and indeed God is our Ebenezer—because I keep thanking the members who really supported me and those who did not believe in me but has seen what God can do through using my leadership skills—and for those that have not supported, God has been fighting for us. And as time went on, we started receiving help from our partner churches. I really felt at peace, you know, that I had achieved one goal not on my own, but with

the help of others around me and also with the protection and guidance and wisdom from God Almighty.

Peggy worked tirelessly during this period. She points out that this has been the period that she committed herself into prayer more than ever before. Of course, she acknowledges that there were some church members who really wanted to see her downfall, from both sides, men and women, but this never happened. She has however worked with Church leaders, executive officers, and other people of high calibre and observed their leadership styles thereby emulating some; and subsequently tried not to acquire the traits of some of those whom she did not admire. In her confessions, Peggy remembers some of the challenges she faced when she was the General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia.

I faced some of the challenges from the church workers—for example when you want only some church workers, some challenges you face are different from when you face the general membership. There are a lot of positive and excellent responses from the general membership than from the church workers. There are some people who would just look at some bad things happening and will not bother to tell you—and...and from the female leadership, sometimes they tend doing things behind your back. As a leader in a male dominated church, you see them degrading you—and sometimes challenges come from the family members. For instance, some relatives of my husband would even request me to go and pray for their family members that are sick (Interview. 2020).

## **Characteristics/themes of this particular Matriarch's theology**

Peggy, being one of our Zambian matriarchs, explains how her leadership role has contributed greatly to building the capacity of some church members. Even though some things could have been difficult at times, Peggy is proud to state that during her reign, many members in the church received both formal and informal trainings. She theologizes that...

Being a human being created in God's own image, I've tried to broaden and cast the net wider—we have offered capacity building, lifted people by offering training facilities equally, below the average and those above informal and formal trainings. We have opened that. Before I came there was only one or two members with PhDs. Proudly, we can say we

have more at the moment—for those with Masters degrees, I can't even mention because they are many, both women and men in the church (Interview. 2020).

The above response serves as a motivation to Peggy because as a matriarch, she sees herself as an agent of change both in the church and the community. This is because within the academic spheres, the church has achieved some of her goals by allowing some members to pursue further studies. Peggy was asked the question: 'if you were to encourage and motivate other women in similar positions, what would be your advice?' She theologically pointed out that...

For me—the secret lies in God—the way one relates with God—when you have faith in God—there may be some challenges yes, simply because you are a woman. You know what, even your fellow women can despise you, for example, when I tell women to do something, the majority are always reluctant, but this is not the case with men. The men will receive the instructions and run and work things out...I believe all these challenges come up because of the way we are socialized—you see even if there are some opportunities for women, the way we see things as women is different from the way men see things—in any case, I have had a lot of opportunities... but because I know that others can benefit as well, I allowed others to take and go—if I am selfish I would not have allowed others to go in my place. That is why I am saying, for women we see things ahead of us. I would encourage another woman just to work as a vessel because, to tell you the truth... (emphasizing the point) 'I have never, never, in my life, fasted and prayed the way I've done it in this office'. We have opened the United Church of Zambia to the world, showing the world that we are indeed somehow transparent and obedient. Of course, one experiences a lot of intimidation. As a woman, you don't have to intimidate and imitate anybody—where they err, one has to be courteous and correct the situation to reach a common ground. I can speak out here—for the past ten years—we have enjoyed peace in this church—I have levelled the ground and no presbytery has gone astray...and to even weigh those ideas, we have allowed heads of departments do their work diligently. I just had to do it with the help of God (Interview. 2020).

In the same interview, Peggy was asked to share her views on women and children who are sexually abused and discriminated in both the church and society? She responded as follows:

We are all created in the image of God—no single life should be abused—I’ve condemned any forms of abuse, be it spiritual, emotional, psychological, sexual, physical...eh...eh... People can be talking about this daily—when I say talking about it, I mean campaigning on these issues and we should not in any way or the other condone such things in our society (Interview. 2022).

Peggy emphasized on the issue of campaigning, to continue raising awareness with regards to sexual and gender-based violence. In Peggy’s view, she contends that this can be addressed...

Through well-structured church-based programmes—well laid information where widows, widowers, street kids, men and women can be looked after and be involved in such programmes by the Community Youth Social Justice Development. When each congregation adds such issues, we can then become decentralized—we should then create some programmes called ‘missional works and Beer Drinking’. In these programmes we identify people within the congregations, even at this level we do such programmes but in many cases we do not hear the outcomes of these programmes. I believe that congregations are more practical (Interview. 2022).

With Peggy, campaigns and/or awareness programmes can well be tackled at the congregational level because this is where some core-researchers get more information from the grassroot level. Peggy responded to the following question, *What does this position mean to you, not only as an African, ordained woman, but also an advocate, a member and Regional Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians?*

The position means humbling myself at the right time. God provided and enabled me to go through the studies—I am not here by account or by mistake—not only to serve my fellow women but men as well—to me it is some kind of service not only to the United Church of Zambia, but also in community—it has made me to be an advocate—lobby for my fellow women, men, and children—right now I need to write on the issue of Climate change, not only about the church but when we combine, we will have a just and peaceful environment because women are soft spoken—and some men are on fire when it comes to issues of God, but God has put me in this position, so that, sometimes one may not feel it in the heart, but to go through elections—they make you strong—this is an opportunity for women to rise and get up—not only the church, but also the countries in the world (Interview. 2022).

Peggy does not regret standing up and advocating for her fellow women. She declares not to be threatened by male power. Theologically, she explains that one should not be threatened by human beings when one is working towards doing good. In her interview with the researcher, Peggy echoed,

*(smiling with an emphasis)* NOO! That is an outright answer—in my Christian faith, I say I will never look to man but to God—To me they do not even matter...you know?...*(smiling and asking)*—we are all created in God’s image— so I am encouraging women to go out there, to attend and present papers at the international conferences (Interview. 2020).

Reflecting on what her name (Peggy Mulambya Kabonde) means to her life and work, and how she wants her name to be remembered, she remarked: ‘Remembered and God-Fearing woman – Humility is my Virtue’ (Interview. 2020).

## **The purpose of the Matriarch’s generated theological thinking**

At the time of writing this chapter, Peggy was serving as a missionary in the United Kingdom. She was asked to share some of her experiences within her current position. She stated that,

...in my current ministry, says Peggy, I always prayed to my God that I want to end my ministry before I finally retire with Christians on the ground (congregations) and graciously God has accorded that opportunity to serve in this part of the world and God’s world. I must say and confess that I was well received and accorded a thunderous warm welcome by both the ordinary Christians and the leaders of the church. Since I came, the people have been very receptive and welcomed my ministry and always looking forward to learning new things about the mission of God.

I have always been asked to share the experiences of the Zambian church and her growth to enable me replicate certain things that could add to the efforts the church in the North is making in terms of witness and discipleship. The mission of God may be the same but approaches differ from context to context. It is fulfilling because I have been given liberty to share what God has imparted in me through the various things that I have been involved in during the tour of my duty.

The only challenge is that one has got to be prayerful and wise on how to propagate the Word of God, because church in this part of the world is not popular but a private matter (Interview. 2022).

## Theoretical Framework

As stated in the beginning, the article is a contribution to the theological journey of Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde. This article acknowledges that Peggy, like any other ordained minister of the Word and Sacrament, has been able to respond to the needs and moods of the community. Peggy is one person who has inspired "...other women and men to give out their best to the community while making the best of their God-given talents and graces", (Gathogo, 2010:2). It is obvious that in her attempt to give out so much to the community, Peggy has experienced overlapping challenges that are more intersectional in her journey.

To this end, the article utilizes intersectionality as the framework. Intersectionality, as first coined by Crenshaw, (1989), is perceived as a lens that one uses to see where power comes and collides, and where it interlocks and intersects, (Crenshaw, 2017:6). This article that discusses the historical and theological journey of Peggy resorts to analyze issues from an intersectional point of view. In our own African set up, intersectionality comes with many attachments. In this article, intersectionality is defined as the lens used to analyse societal issues faced by human beings such as sex, race, gender, location, class, ableism, ageism, position and the socio-religio-cultural issues. Coupled with some power dynamics in societies, these are multiple identities that entangle a person and make that person unable to function like any other human being.

Garry's (2011) explanation will be adopted to analyse the life and theological experiences of Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde. Garry (2011:827) advocates that "intersectional analyses the fundamental point that we all have many important facets to our identities that are impacted differently by multiple interacting systems of oppression and privilege depending on the various aspects of our identities". In Peggy's case, one would carefully try to examine the background where Peggy was born. Her parents were committed Christians in the Free Methodist church in the colonial era. Peggy joined the Girls' Brigade at a very young age. It is obvious there was no ordained woman minister of the Word during the period 1950 to 1970. Using intersectional lens, and bringing to light the power dynamics that the missionaries possessed, the missionary era was dominated by

'holy patriarchs'.<sup>3</sup> Our parents did not seem to realize how systems of culture, religion, patriarchy, gender and race would impact on their own children in future. Even if they were aware, it was difficult for some of them to choose to live a life-style that was separate from their neighbours. This is why Garry argues that:

Recent work on "epistemologies of ignorance" has called attention to the ways in which dominant groups' ignorance is constructed and maintained; explorations of whose power is served by such ignorance; and the ways that our current interests, beliefs, and theories block why we sometimes do not even know that we do not know, or if we do know it, why we do not care (Garry, 2011:827).

Of course, the powers of the colonial missionaries were served by the 'ignorance of our innocent parents'. They did not realize that their children's identities, beliefs, interests and theories would be blocked by multiple interacted systems of oppression and other systems of marginalization without really considering the effects these would cause on their children. In this article, we acknowledge and analyse the multiple interacted systems of oppression faced by Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde by using intersectionality as a framework.

## **Using Intersectionality as a Framework: Analyzing Peggy's Theological Journey**

Yee, (2020:8) observes that "in wrestling theoretically with the problem of inequality and poverty, I found that the most helpful analytical tool to help me avoid compartmentalizing gender, race, class, et cetera was "intersectionality." Yee is of the view that intersectionality is the most helpful analytical tool to help us avoid putting issues that entangle us and render us powerless into groups, to see how all these oppressive structures are connected to each other. Peggy's story enables one to realise that she was exposed to be in leadership positions and to look up to God at a very young age. She joined the Girls' Brigade of Zambia when she was in grade 4. Surely, even if she did not mention this during the interview, there were no boys or men in the Girls' Brigade at that time, meaning

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<sup>3</sup> Ruether (1983:53), elaborating on Holy Patriarchy, states that women and children are connected to God in a secondary manner. Women and children do not stand in direct relation to God, but they do so in an indirect manner, through the male. This is the God-male-female format.

that Peggy was given a group of young girls and not *boys* to lead. She was not able to join the Boys' Brigade, or to lead the boys, because, culturally, it was not *right*, and morally and colonially, it was *wrong*. A black girl needed to know her limits and her place during the colonial era. She needed to show that she was submissive; first, to the white regime; second, to the black leaders who were also submissive to the colonial powers, and, third, to the community where she was coming from. In support of this, Crenshaw (1989:160), writing from the black American point of view, informs us that "black women are caught between a Black community that, perhaps understandably, views with suspicion attempts to litigate questions of sexual violence and a feminist community that reinforces those suspicions by focusing on [black] female sexuality." Even though Crenshaw writes from a different context, it is also evident in Peggy's socio-cultural and religio-cultural contexts that appointing her to be a leader among both women and men could have reinforced suspicions from both leaders and the community because such issues *just never existed* at all.

In this article, employing intersectionality as a framework is important. Intersectionality helps us "...to explore the link between structural and systemic inequalities and African women's socio-cultural, religio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political oppression as it relates to" issues that Peggy encountered in her theological journey (Naicker, 2021:37). All these have power issues attached to them. Using intersectionality as an analytical lens also opens our eyes and mindset to analyse the socio-cultural, religio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political issues that Peggy grew up from. From the religio-cultural and socio-political point of view, the first three years after Peggy was born was the time that Zambia was ruled by colonial powers. The white missionaries had so much influence and power to win the souls of the black people through their own interpretation of the gospel. Magesa (2004:6) argues that "the gospel is a cultural reality" because Christian missionaries transmit to listeners "...their own understanding of the gospel", according to the way it has developed in "their own communities". At the same time, this also has an influence on the Christian missionaries' "...interpretation of the message" (Magesa, 2004:6).

One would imagine just how many different 'types' of missionaries Peggy and her parents were exposed to. Hastings (1994:4) observes that "the year 1785 was a significant year for the penetration of some missionaries in Central Africa". Peggy's parents were Christians in the Free

Methodist Church. However, converting black people to Christianity was not the only aim that the missionaries had. Garvey (1994:62) is of the view that “the more urbanized Protestant missionaries sought to develop commerce both as a means of opposing slavery and of development”. Henceforth, some missionaries also engaged in commerce as a way of economic prosperity.

By the time Peggy started school, Zambia had obtained its independence. Apart from being a member of the Girls’ Brigade, Peggy was also a member of the church choir. Peggy grew up in a context where culture was more favourable and gave power towards men. Peggy has seen how power lies in the hands of those who are able to dominate others. Becker (1996:164) refers to this kind of power, such as the one that gives authority to men as more authoritative. She continues to assert that this kind of power is more authoritative and can be referred to as “power as commodity which is power over” (Becker, 1996:164). Culture has power and issues attached to it come with different power dynamics. Men have been, in many contexts, considered to be the ‘heads’ of households, leaders in society and the ones chosen as elders in the church before they start ordaining African men. Peggy attended the evangelism campaigns organized by Bill Hincks. Whatever language was used during the Bill Hincks campaigns did not only influence Peggy, but multitudes of believers.

Language is powerful and dynamic. Language opens doors for knowledge. Knowledge therefore, comes with a lot of power. Commenting on language, Boonzaaier and van der Walt (2019:99), advocate that, “in the same way that language constructs “economic, social and political discourses” that inform violence and the violation of women, language also constructs discourses that inform heteronormative and homophobic practices”. All these influenced Peggy’s upbringing in the manner that made her learn how to interact with people from different contexts and to positively acknowledge that both women and men are created in the image of God.

According to Gathogo (2010:7), “In my own assessment, African Women’s Theologies emerged out of the need to create a forum in seeking to liberate African women from the oppressive structures in both the society and the religious institutions, and especially the Church”. With regard to the socio-economic oppression, Peggy’s parents worked tirelessly to educate their children despite the socio-economic oppression, from the commercial missionaries as well as the socio-culturally-based institutions. The forces of authority by the colonial era made them work

tirelessly. Peggy chose to go into ministry in 1983. There were only three women in the ministry-based-institution, with Peggy being the fourth. Using intersectional lens, the religio-cultural system in which men were the custodians of the church dominated the whole space. It is either women were marginalized during that period or the language that was used was more discriminatory against women. Boonzaaier and van der Walt (2019:99) further argue that, “it is important to reflect on language and the way terms and concepts are used in talking, especially about theology”. Although Boonzaaier and van der Walt are referring to other contexts, the issue of language that they have mentioned applies to each and every society because it is the misuse of language that reinforces marginalization of individuals in a given group or society.

Even though the four women were brave enough to be amongst the men, it is important to analyze the structural and systemic inequalities between the two genders. There were more than 10 men than women. What were the experiences of the women in that given culture? The experiences of the women during their theological training at the same theological college with men are not told. It is important to bring the hidden life histories of these women to an open space. An important question one should ask is, *were the women given all the recognition that they deserved or did they feel like leaving?* In trying to answer this question, Oduyoye’s (2001) words are echoed. She observes that within the church structure:

the question a feminist ecclesiology has to answer is not whether or not women ought to ‘leave’ or ‘stay’, but how it is possible to rethink what it means to be church within a theology paradigm which aim at reconsidering the basics of Christian theology and practice in feminist terms (2001:4).

Drawing from Oduyoye’s words, many African women have never wanted to leave the church. Power dynamics are at play in every aspect of a woman’s life. And the same applied to Peggy and her three women counterparts.

Kanyoro (2001b:163) cautions us that it is not right to condemn African women whose mindsets are deeply rooted in patriarchal societies. Instead of condemning our fellow women, we should “...seek to understand how societies are organized, and how power is used by different groups of people, by men and women, and by young and old and by people of varying economic means” (Kanyoro, 2001b:163). Peggy acknowledges that there were some church members who wanted to celebrate her

downfall, from both sides, men and women. She also recalls how she has prayed ceaselessly during the time she was the General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia. In Peggy's view, her experience with some of her fellow women in the church made her realize that women can be difficult to work with than men. This is why Kanyoro (2001b:163) perceives that such women's actions are deeply rooted in patriarchal socialization. Using intersectional lens, Peggy experienced the structural and systemic inequalities and African women's socio-cultural, religio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political oppressions during her reign. Yet, the more she felt the pain, the more Peggy experienced her closeness to God. This paved way for her to mould both men and women and journeyed with them in God's mission.

Nadar (2005:61) affirms that "... we wish to hear women's voices and visions of being church so that we can affirm those aspects of the church which women find liberating, but also so that we may engage and address those aspects which women find oppressive". What Nadar is saying is that for many women such as Peggy, some relationships in the church between the women and men within church leadership are still hindrances to women empowerment. When a woman is in power, it is difficult for her fellow women to accept her as their leader. This is worse when it comes to men who negatively believe that a woman may rule over them. Such men would rather support their 'own' biological daughters campaign for political positions than their own wives. Some men even find it difficult to mention the name of their wives, or they may have forgotten the names of the loved ones. Intersectionality as a framework should help us open our eyes and minds so that we do not see others as stumbling blocks, but as members who lack some knowledge and information.

Yee (2020:17) advocates that "intersectionality is concerned with relations of power, and the ways that systems of power are implicated in the development, organization, and maintenance of social inequalities". With regard to class, Peggy is an educated minister, who also gained power and popularity because of understanding the Word of God in English as well as in her local language. In the midst of Peggy's life, was herself as a daughter, Peggy's husband as a companion, her four children to take care of, her extended family, her role as the General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia, as a leader with members who looked up to her as the mother of the church, enemies of progress who were waiting for her

downfall, and many, many other facets of life that she experienced. During this period, Peggy was not only a black woman, but *an iron lady*<sup>4</sup>, and an ordained minister of the Word of Sacrament. Peggy has been the *first* black woman, ordained, with a Doctor of Philosophy degree to hold the position of the General Secretary. Intersectionality as a framework needs to reveal to *us* whether there has ever been an ordained black man holding a Doctorate in Philosophy in the same position. With the experience of pursuing her studies, Peggy encouraged and extended her hand and opened doors for many to pursue further studies. It is her wish that when the majority of members in the church get acquainted with the relevant information and knowledge, it will be easy for many to address all structures and systemic oppressions using intersectional lens.

## CONCLUSION

The article sought to bring out the theological journey of Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde. In this article, the researcher sought to interview Peggy Mulambya-Kabonde by bringing out her historical, educational and ministerial background. The major thing that has been dealt with in this article is to bring out the 'original' voice of Peggy which is self-explanatory than being interpreted by the researcher. Peggy was available for interviews on two occasions. Her availability has enriched the analysis of this article.

The article utilized intersectionality as a framework. In this article, intersectionality has been described as an interconnectedness of structural, systemic oppression, socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religio systems that an individual faces everyday of one's life. Issues of power dynamics are also at play in this article. The article reveals some experiences of Peggy during her position as the General Secretary of the United Church of Zambia. The article argues that all these are reinforced

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<sup>4</sup> Some members of the church referred to Peggy as an iron lady. They indicated that there were times when Peggy would be very tough and roar and many members would be afraid to get into her office. Some have stated that, just the tone of her voice, made them realize how fearless and strong Peggy is. Moreover, others hated her for speaking the truth while others stated that Peggy never allowed some people to speak their minds out in times of pastoral issues.

by power dynamics. The article has explored some arguments from scholars such as Gale Yee, Musimbi Kanyoro, Isabel Phiri and Mercy Oduyoye, just to mention a few, to give a clear understanding of the lived experiences of some African women in patriarchal societies.

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## 21 | Tears do not mean Blockage to the Successful Bright Future: The story of Felicidade Chirinda of the Presbyterian Church of Mozambique

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### **Abstract**

African women theologians are the pioneers of gender justice in their communities. However, their work on gender justice has not been an easy process, some have experienced emotional abuse that led to internal weeping and grieving. They have been bullied and silenced by the authorities of their churches, families and other women forcing them into the peripherals of society, yet this did not stop them from pursuing the gender justice struggle. This chapter follows a narrative methodology to tell a story of one of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CCAWT) (Thereafter the Circle) matriarchs, Felicidade Chirinda from Mozambique. Chirinda's story will be analysed through Mercy Oduyoye's theology of Christian Ministry as partnership of women and men. The chapter shows that when women and men partner in ministry, gender justice and development can be achieved.

**Keywords:** Rev Dr Felicidade Chirinda, Presbyterian Church of Mozambique, Gender justice, Theology of Christian ministry and development

### **Introduction**

Gender justice has long been a source of contention and remains one of the most pressing human rights issues. Theologians and other scholars have attempted to explain why gender justice is still debatable in churches and in society, where women are inhibited from participating in the so-called male terrains or spheres (Familusi, 2012:310). According to the biblical perspective, scholars contend that the Old Testament stipulates that women are to be under the authority of all men (Madu,

2014:124). As a result of this claim, gender justice has been a thorn in the side of the church for a long time, as women are pushed to the pews and men into alters and leadership positions. However, according to the theological principle, people were created in God's image with equal rights and indignity; thus, women are obligated to have full rights of participation and to occupy leadership roles at all levels in their churches and societies. In addition, Mercy Oduyeye (1988) and other African women theologians established the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CCAWT) (hereinafter the Circle), which aimed at liberating women in the church and in society. More so, the Lutheran World Federation (2013) argues that gender justice is about the protection and promotion of the dignity of women and men who, being created in the image of God, are co-responsible stewards of creation. Following the biblical perspective on women, churches have become a hotbed of gender injustice (Owusu, 2014:49). Furthermore, the Christian patriarchy viewpoint held that God created men to be the head of the family, the provider, and protector (Efe, 2020). As a result, Machingura and Nyakuhwa (2015:112) criticize the Church of Christ as patriarchal and argue that:

It is still a bone of contention as to whether the Church of Christ is upgrading or downgrading the status of women. Though the church has been known to be the voice of the voiceless in dealing with critical issues like the welfare of widows and orphans, disabled persons; one wonders what has happened to the case of women on leadership positions. Were they born to be followers of men? ... Patriarchy is to blame on most challenges faced by women in our society and church today.

The Circle has been fighting patriarchy since its inauguration, where they constantly reject gender inequality in church. They have been using their lived experiences of gender struggles to advocate for elimination of patriarchy. Isabel Phiri notes that theological institutes are dominated by male voices, as a result she argues that the Circle came together to reflect on what it means to be women of faith within their experiences of religion, culture, politics and social-economic structures in Africa (Phiri, 2008). Woman's place has been defined as the domestic space. For African men, it is not a norm for women to lead when there are men. Women involved in leadership positions are often demeaned and humiliated.

The primary goal of this study is to evaluate the impact of Circle in combating gender inequality through the story of Felicidade Chirinda of the Presbyterian Church of Mozambique, who was denigrated, humiliated, and sabotaged by men in positions of authority in her church because

she is a woman. The chapter will specifically investigate the effect of the Circle in combating patriarchy, which was perceived as a barrier to gender equality between men and women in churches, as well as debate whether ministerial collaboration between men and women would promote gender justice and development. This chapter follows narrative research as it is the principal method used by African women theologians in telling stories about their experiences in a patriarchal world. Mercy Oduyoye's theology on Christian Ministry as partnership of 'women and men' is used to analyse Chirinda's story. The chapter starts off by describing the methodology and theology of the study. This is followed by teasing out themes of a gender justice struggle in Church as it is narrated by Chirinda.

## **Narrative Research and Christian Ministry as Partnership of Women and Men**

African women theologians use story telling or narrative research to interrogate their lived experiences. Kanyoro (2001:168) advocates for storytelling to probe cultural conditioning of African women's thinking in order to discover the origins of their belief system. Storytelling is part of narrative research used by African women theologians to tell their hidden stories and use those stories to argue for gender justice. According to Kanyoro (2002:23):

...our stories are a basis for theology. Indeed, women globally are saying theology should begin with our stories – what we feel in our society, how we feel about our children, our families, what enrages us, what makes us laugh, what our lives mean to the next neighbour and how we experience God in all of these.

Data used in this chapter is teased out from Felicidade Chirinda's essay about her lived experiences of gender injustice in her church in Mozambique. It is assumed that Chirinda's story of gender injustice is every woman's story.

## **Felicidade Chirinda's Biography**

Chirinda was born in 1950, the first child in a family of seven. She grew up in a Christian family. Her father served as the Evangelist and missionaries' driver in the Presbyterian church of Mozambique and later became

a minister of the word and sacrament in 1962 in the same church. Chirinda by then was 12 years old. For a man it is very easy to climb the ladder of leadership as per one's wishes, support and resources will always be available.

When Chirinda reached the age of 7, her parents sent her to stay with Aunt Dorothy Chirinda the sister to her father in Maputo the capital city of Mozambique to start her primary education. In Matutuine rural where her parents were staying, there were no schools. Chirinda's stay with Aunt Dorothy was like spreading salt on a fresh wound due to traditional and cultural beliefs which say whatever is done by aunties is appropriate for children especially the girl child. Her father ordered Chirinda to go back to her aunt's place without any intervention which worsened her situation. This act by the parents created a deep hatred between Aunt Dorothy and Felicidade's mother. Chirinda narrated "I cried and could not stop until I arrived at school". During school assembly time, School Director Ms Christine Ries saw her and took her to her house and from that day she committed to take care Chirinda. The school director notified her parents about this situation who agreed with it. When she was 16 Chirinda was staying with another missionary who was working in Mozambique until she turned 18. Chirinda describes this period as the beginning of her hard and turbulent journey to the vocation affirmation (Chirinda, 2022).

It is true that success never comes on a silver platter. When Chirinda finished her secondary education, Suisse missionaries trained her as a Pre-school teacher, and she worked there for 2 years. She was forced to leave the work because her father who was working as the minister of the word was suspended in the church, and this affected her. Being the elderly child, she was forced to look for a job to take care of her siblings which was a setback in her life journey. There is a Shona proverb which says, "*rugare tangenhamo*" meaning, good life comes after a struggle. Hence, ways to success have hurdles and as a female the road is rougher compared to a male.

Chirinda got married in 1975 and was blessed with 2 children a girl and a boy. After 8 years of marriage her husband was involved in a serious car accident which left him with permanent handicap and wheelchair for the rest of his life for 19 years until he passed on. During this period, Chirinda had to resign from her job to be a full-time caregiver to her husband until his death in 2000. She remained a widow and committed to take care for her children, parents, and siblings.

## **Felicidade Chirinda' Story of Gender Injustice**

Chirinda who against all odds defeated patriarchy from domesticating her succeeded in leading the church of Mozambique as a woman. She has worked side by side with men and women in stewardship, diaconal, uniting men and women in ministry. The following themes from Chirinda's essay will be discussed in connection to gender justice: Oppression of women by other women; empowerment of women is an empowerment for the community, empowering each other; missionary education enforcing women's gender roles (pre-school teacher). This is followed by other themes of Chirinda journey in the midst of pains and tears in the hand of the church and also the gender injustice she experienced as a lay person and an ordained minister.

### **Oppression of Women by other Women**

Many years later, my mother told me that my suffering in the hands of Auntie Dorothy was the cause of her heart disease, recounts Chirinda (2022). One could imagine how women suffer for their children to the extent of developing chronic diseases. Felicidade's primary school was full of tears, misery, and she became uninterested in education due to the treatment by her aunt. She pointed out that the aunt mistreated her to the point where one day she cut her hair on one side and people at school laughed and made fun of her (Chirinda, 2022). It is very regretful for women to ill-treat other women. "Regardless of whether this indirect aggression toward other women a result of biology or social conditioning is, we all have a choice. A choice to change the overwhelming trend of tearing each other down instead of building each other up".<sup>1</sup> Women are not aware that when we tear one other down, we (women) destroy our future.

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<sup>1</sup> When We Tear One Woman Down, We Tear All Women Down. | HuffPost Voices 20<sup>th</sup> July 2022, 10-25.

## **Missionary education enforcing women's gender roles (pre-school teacher)**

Patriarchal rule clearly distinguishes the values and norms that women and men can embrace. This chapter considered this as gender conditioning or socialization. Thus, gender conditioning from birth crippled human mind to the extent of normalizing this abnormal. Hence the African culture conditioned people that women are inferior and there is no space for women leadership, and they took it as normal. Suisse missionaries who trained Chirinda as a pre-school teacher might think that she helped her to cross the bridge of oppression, instead, Suisse just domesticated her to do what the community and patriarchy system expects from a woman i.e., taking care of children, the sick and being a housewife. In some instances, Women are guilty of internalising oppressive socialisations (Chisale, 2018). African women theologians such as Kamaara and Wangila (2009:131) argue that 'women are not only victims but also perpetrators of oppression against themselves'. Women tend to protect some oppressive teachings of culture and tradition. However, other theologians have denigrated the allegations posed against women for being the perpetrators of oppression against themselves (Oduyoye, 2003b). This is because women are only allowed to conform to the church and traditional doctrines, which inhibits them from participating in male terrain, thereby making women continue to be the victims (Chisale, 2018).

## **Concept of Patriarchy**

The term patriarchy literally means father's rule, and it was originally used to describe a certain type of man-dominated household, the patriarch's massive home, which included women, junior males, children, slaves, and domestic workers all under the sway of one dominant male (Stone, 2012). It is now more broadly defined as male domination, power dynamics in which males dominate women, and a system in which women are kept subservient in a variety of ways (Swift, 2010).

Ankara (2009) highlighted that patriarchy refers to male domination in both the public and private spheres. Feminists frequently use the term patriarchy to describe the power dynamics between men and women. As a result, to feminists, patriarchy is more than a term; it is an idea, and like other concepts, it is a tool for understanding women's experiences (White, 2005). Various academics describe patriarchy in different ways.

Patriarchy is defined by Mitchell, a feminist psychologist, as kinship systems in which males sell women (Zahedi, 2008). According to Walby (1990:20), patriarchy is described as a system of social structures and practices in which males control, enslave, and exploit women. She regards patriarchy as a system because it allows us to reject the idea of biological determinism, which holds that men and women are born equal.

As a result, patriarchy refers to the system of institutionalized male superiority. As a result, patriarchy may be characterized as a network of financially based social links between men and women that, although hierarchical, promote or support masculine independence and unity, allowing males to exert authority over women (Jagger and Rosenberg, 1984). Patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological distinctions between men and women, ensuring that males are always in dominating, or masculine, positions and females are always in subordinate, or feminine, roles (Keyman et al., 2004). Due to the prevalence of this paradigm, men frequently gain the seeming cooperation of the very women they punish (White, 2005). This is achieved "through institutions like academia, the church, and the family, each of which justifies and encourages women's service to men." Millett (1977:35). The patriarchal system is characterized by power, domination, hierarchy, and competitiveness. As a result, patriarchy refers to males as a societal framework and practices dominating, abusing, and exploiting women (Sturges, 2004).

In terms of the origins of patriarchy, traditionalists believe that males are intended to control and females to be subordinate, which explains the popularity and genesis of patriarchy (Shorideh et al., 2012). They believe that this hierarchy has always existed and will continue to exist, much like other natural laws. Others argue that patriarchy is man-made, not natural, and hence susceptible to change. Aristotle provided analogous "theories" in this respect, referring to males as active and females as passive (Swift, 2010). In his perspective, female meant "mutilated man," someone without a soul. According to him, a woman's fundamental frailty causes her to be inferior in her capabilities, understanding capacity, and, as a result, ability to form judgments (Sturges, 2004). Men are born to dominate, and women are born to be dominated because they are superior to him. "A man's courage is demonstrated when he tells a woman to conform," he observed (Learner, 1989:8-11).

According to modern psychology, women's biology influences their minds, and hence their skills and responsibilities. Sigmund Freud, for

example, felt that anatomy determined women's fate (Stone, 2012). A typical human being, in his perspective, was a man (Freud, 1977). Yet, these concepts of male supremacy have been contested, and no historical or scientific evidence to support such beliefs has been uncovered. Although men and women have biological differences, these disparities do not have to serve as the foundation for a male-dominated sexual hierarchy (Somer, 2007). Consideration of some of these notions leads us to believe that patriarchy is the outcome of historical processes. There is no accepted hypothesis on the origins of patriarchy. I will only quickly outline a few of the key notions presented here. Friedrich Engels released *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* in 1884, which provided an essential explanation for the origins of patriarchy. Engels was born in 1940. Phillips (2010) noted that, women's subordination began, according to Engels, with the development of private property, when the feminine sex was vanquished throughout history. He claims that historically, both class divisions and female servitude evolved (Nash, 2008). When private property initially formed in society, males fought hard to maintain their power and property so that they might pass it on to their children (Swift, 2010). To secure this inheritance, the mother's right was abolished. To secure the father's prerogative, women had to be domesticated and restrained, and their sexuality had to be managed and controlled. Patriarchy and monogamy for women evolved during this time period, according to Engels (Sinha, 2010).

## **Women's Subordination**

Patriarchy, which believes that men are innately superior to women, shamelessly supports women's dependency on and subordination to men in all aspects of life (Chisale, 2018). As a result, men wield complete power and authority in the family, community, and state. As a result of patriarchy, women were denied legal rights and opportunities (Kasomo, 2010:129). Patriarchal ideals hinder women's mobility by denying them autonomy over themselves and their possessions. Subordination means having less power or authority than someone else in a group or organization (Hornby 2003:1296).

Subordination of women in most nations refers to their lower status, lack of access to resources and decision-making, and patriarchal dictatorship (Moyo, 2021). As a result, female subordination reflects their inferior status when compared to males. Feelings of powerlessness, prejudice, and

low self-esteem and confidence all contribute to women's subjugation. Female subordination is thus a power dynamic in which men govern over women. Women's subordination is an essential component of all interpersonal dominance systems; however, feminists place it in different places and for different reasons (Chisale, 2018). Contemporary feminist philosophy begins with Simone de Beauvoir's contention that women are assigned to the second sex and are therefore subordinate because males perceive them as fundamentally different from themselves (Beauvior, 1974). Women, according to Kate Millet's idea of subordination, are a dependent sex class subject to patriarchal dominance (Millet, 1977). The patriarchal system oppresses women in a multitude of ways. Nyangweso (2009) highlighted that discrimination, neglecting, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, and violence are all forms of subordination we experience on a daily basis, regardless of class, in the home, at work, and in society (Moyo, 2021).

## **Breaking the Patriarchy Walls**

Following the trend of early church fathers, which ruled the nature of women to the extent of lost human identity, Recatla seminary Board of IPM maintained this understanding of these old and corrupt school of thought and tried to hinder Chirinda's calling to the ordained ministry. Plato and Aristotle believed that women are inferior to men and labelled them essentially as child-bearers and housekeepers, (Wood, 2017:2). Kasomo (2010:128) cited Augustine's views that a woman can only get the image of God when taken together with man who is her head. Due to this fact a woman is always assigned the role of a helpmate. Hence the helpmate is only assigned to procreation and care giving (Kasomo, 2010:129; Moyo, 2021).

However, by virtue of playing the role of father in the family, Chirinda was respected as an important figure in the society (Chisale, 2018). This has opposed the proposal of Plato, Aristotle, and other African theologians of considering women as child bearers and housekeeper (Madu, 2014). Chirinda proved that it is not about the church, men, or human beings' decision but about Oduyoye theory which is the main leading theology of this article of "Christian Ministry as Partnership" as opposed to men dominant leadership. Emphasising the theology of "Two Wings" gives basis and makes it possible in terms of African context in development. The IPM Recatla Board, other churches and communities refused

women leadership, they reacted to an old school of thought that is even currently criticised by African theologians of irrelevant context to African gender challenges of women inclusion. Nyangweso (2009:110-111) says:

basic argument is that Eurocentric-based approaches to gender empowerment in Africa are unhealthy as they tend to promote antagonism and competition. A feminist theological paradigm that is suitable for this context is one that acknowledges that men and women ought to work together as complementary agents. While past approaches to gender equality have been efficient in empowering women, they have not been effective because: (i) they have alienated the sexes to the detriment of society; and (ii) they do not take cognizance of the cultural context of Africa where family values and relationships hold high premium. Utilizing an African feminist hermeneutics that draw from a contextual theology, these authors argue for a gender complementarity approach as opposed to gender competitiveness.

These views by Oduyoye and Nyangweso mentioned above are supported by Isindebele proverb that says, “*Izandla ziyagezana*” and Shona “*Chara chimwe hachitsvanhi inda*” meaning one person cannot achieve greater work by themselves. The involvement of women as women doing theology through CCAWT opened new biblical pedagogies reflections that improve biblical interpretations.

Regardless of all difficulties she went through in this process, Chirinda enrolled at Khovo School of theology for three years and got a certificate in Theology. Due to her hard work, her New Testament lecturer Prof. Alexander Milton encouraged her to join the United Seminary of Ricatha (USR) to do two-year Diploma in Theology (Chirinda 2022). This move by Prof. Milton was not accepted by the majority members of the church board since at this stage, she was the only woman to compete with male student pastors. Nevertheless Prof. Milton insisted on support by Rev Dr Chamango who made personal compromise and openly saying, it is time to involve women in Theological Studies. Therefore, our General Treasurer can pursue Theological Studies at the Seminary. However, if she neglects her work at the Finance Department, she will be suspended at Ricatla<sup>2</sup> (Chirinda, 2022). However, with conditions which were attached that, if she neglected her duties at the financial Department, she would be suspended at Ricatla. It is always women who are given positions to lead,

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, the Rev Dr. Simão Chamango was the Presbyterian Church Synod Council President as well as the Rector of the United Seminary of Ricatla.

with conditions to measure performance for approval. As a result of this, Oduyoye (2001) argues that, often woman's power is denied, and their experiences rejected they are given limited space attached with some strings that do not allow them freedom to express their feelings.

## **Fighting Oppression against All Odds**

Chirinda was trained under spotlight conditions, meaning that making any mistake would cause her to be exonerated because she is a woman who joined men's domain. Chirinda passed with high marks to the extent that the same professor wanted to send her to South Africa for further studies as a way of preparing her to be a future lecturer at Ricatla Seminary. Once again, the IPM church leadership refused (Chirinda, 2022). Yet again, as if this was not enough and to strengthen their church patriarchy rule, they refused to send her to parishes for pastoral internship training. Madu (2014:123) pointed as undisputed that, women in the bible left milestones of development and revolution of their communities notwithstanding all probabilities against them. Mercy Oduyoye, an African theologian, argues that women are born to believe that being born a female resembles being born innately inferior, and due to their low self-esteem, they underrate themselves (Osuwu, 2015). This greatly hinders them from participating in male sports.

Additionally, in the African traditional perspective, women are also the most exploited, oppressed, and restricted by taboos, including by involving them in education processes that also constrain them from participating in male terrain (Familusi, 2012:310). However, this perspective is now considered an outdated practice since women are increasingly participating in churches and other social platforms. For instance, women such as Ester, Deborah, and Hannah were involved in super tasks that can be an encouraging point for today's women. The other example portrayed by Bangladesh community cited by Moyo (2021) from Solomon Island report (2016) said, women's leadership and authority have figurative power because it challenges prevalent theories that say men are leaders and a woman's place is in the home: When women start participating, it is difficult to speak out. In some places people are now supporting them. They had to prove they are honest and capable of leadership like Chirinda. Thus, there is need for demystifying gender inequality fears which is one critical issue to be incorporated. Chirinda applied same method of Participatory Bangladesh community using performance and

capabilities of few women in leadership post as the panacea to transforming the attitude of community towards women (Moyo, 2021). Chirinda's decision to study diploma in theology supported by two board members increased her critical analysis in theological views. Chisale (2020), pointed that resistance occurs because the church in Africa is a fertile ground where the oppression of women is promoted, and patriarchy is elevated as a norm. Of which patriarchy is an ideology that allows male leadership legitimising the oppression of women in all sectaries of societies (Sultana, 2010).

This situation was criticised by other church members to question the IPM attitude toward women ministry (Chirinda, 2022). African Women Theologians advocated for partnership as stressed by Oduyoye's (2001) "Partnership between women and men" points to the common issue raised in (Genesis 1:26ff), that men and woman are to rule over all creation together (Moyo, 2021).

## **Women Empowerment is Empowerment for the Community**

During her time at home as a widow Chirinda voluntarily helped women church groups to engage in livelihood activities. She proved true what the Commission of Status of Women report (2006) hypothesized that, women exclusion from leadership is a package for the non-development of a country. Every society should learn to accept the ability of women in leadership position if they desire to develop. It was during this volunteering when Rev Dr Chamango identified Chirinda and invited her to join Concourse Organised by the Presbyterian church of Mozambique.

In her autobiographical narrative Chirinda highlights the floods that affected Mozambique in 2000 displacing poor households. This is where she showcased her leadership skills and started to work organising people in groups of volunteers that provided care to the affected. This act is supported by IsiNdebele saying, "*Ukufundisa owesifazana yikufundisa isizwe sonke*" meaning, empowering a woman is to empower the whole nation. According to Chirinda, the situation challenged them as a group of concerned citizens to build a vocational school completed in 2004 for those children hence their mothers also benefited by getting knowledge on how to read and write and people were baptised at this school which was called Christian Association Women Arise supported by various partners. Chirinda's initiatives at Mozambique due to floods of 2000 left a legacy of which many lives survived socially, spiritually, and physically.

Regardless of all these, the IPM church was blinded to recognise all this and refused to officiate the opening ceremony of the institution existing today. The work done by Chirinda was validated by Sandler and Steel (2000:68), saying, “Though women appear invisible, they have been the pillars of parishes and take care of the local church and its worship”. Chirinda’s leadership shows that dominance of men in leadership positions is not an end, a partnership with women can yield more positive results.

### **Visible Emancipation Influence**

Creation of Women Association enabled Chirinda to deal with various challenges: cultural issues, educational needs and economic issues affecting women livelihoods in the community. During her women emancipation period, she was the first woman in the community and church (IPM) to speak out denouncing discrimination and stigmatisation of People Living with HIV/AIDS with IPM Association members, (Chirinda, 2022). The denouncement created furore to the IPM’ leadership who as a result accused Chirinda as being a ringleader of women’s movement against the Church, leading the church to suspending women Association activities. The suspension did not materialise as the majority church members were in favour of Women association work. To date, the Association activities continue progressing within the Church and in the community.

### **Women Empowering other Women**

Chirinda received strength and resilience from being a member of the Circle. Her work academically and in praxis is informed by the Circle’s objective to destroy and eliminate patriarchy in all areas of life. Oduyoye (2001:17) asserts that African women’s theology is concerned about promoting healthy and equal relations, replacing hierarchies with mutuality, theology that is society sensitive. This is true as the African community set-up is very communal oriented which the issue of societal relationships is core and valued. Few people could act as Prof. Milton and Rev Dr Chamango did to stand their ground for Chirinda and openly denounce the church’s women discrimination and oppression acts. In 2002 Chirinda in the Addis Ababa Continental Circle meeting was elected Lusophone chapter Coordinator due to her leadership calibre noticed by

Musa Dube who invited her to participate in a writing workshop in Botswana with the aim of producing an HIV/AIDS on sermon, liturgy and prayers for African Churches since the pandemic was rampaged by that time. Chirinda contributed 9 passages in Portuguese and the title of the book *Is Africa Praying: A Handbook on HIV/AIDS Sensitive Sermon Guidelines and Liturgy* that was launched on her absence in Cameroon, the IPM did not send a delegate but other denominations from Mozambique sent male delegates who by knowing Chirinda's leadership character nominated her. However, IPM reacted by writing a letter to the AACC General Secretary to consider another name than Chirinda's name which was rejected by the AACC Council. The IPM church as a way of punishing its pastor Chirinda ignored her position and did not support her travelling in cash or kind to the meetings

## **Growing Leadership Opportunities**

In June 2001, a week before Chirinda ordination, the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM) Women's Desk Society proposed Chirinda's name to the position of women advisers. But IPM leadership advanced another name of a female pastor contesting Chirinda's nomination. Surprisingly, at the end of that year, the colleague who had been sent to the CCM' Women' Desk left the post. The CCM Women' Desk used that opportunity to renew their request for Chirinda who was now ordained. They also elected her also as the Vice-chairperson of the CCM Board Council which she served both positions. These positions opened doors for her to participate in many ecumenical platforms within the country Mozambique and international. When her term of office ended in 2009, she was elected as the Senate member, and Scripture Union National Director. She was then elected as the first woman National President and Board Chairperson in 2018, a position that she occupies to date (2022). This election came as a retirement package as she was already retired as the minister in the IPM. The words of Isaiah (55:8) "For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord" are fulfilled and sometimes the church hinders God's plans thinking it is fighting a human being.

Whenever, God opens the way no one can block it. In 2005 in Nigeria at AACC General Committee Meeting they passed a decision to send Chirinda to further her theological studies at University of Pretoria in South Africa which also caused a friction within the IPM as it prohibited

her again to further her studies as if they were paying for her fees. Chirinda liberated herself by ignoring the decision by the church and sent her farewell letter to church for going to peruse her studies. The refusal decision by IPM for denying women leadership portrayed pure patriarchy ruling and ignorance. It forgot that God authorised both male and female to rule over His creation, (Genesis 1:26-31). There is nowhere God instructs superior rule to men only, meaning God's plan from the beginning was for women and men to work in partnership on equal ground. In her writing on "Partnership between women and men", especially in leadership, Phiri, and Haddad (2003) argued that: the church should also critically revisit the androcentric understandings of the Bible since these understandings have contributed to the perpetuation of that the female is inferior, and that the latter is God ordained. Although the IPM did not recognised Chirinda's position in the AACC other churches did and through her leadership they invited AACC to hold its general assembly for the first time in Mozambique. In that assembly Chirinda was elected for another position to serve as the AACC Southern Africa Vice-President.

Chirinda finished her PhD in practical theology in 2012 and graduated regardless of fostered more hatred from IPM leadership against Chirinda's personality. In July 2012 after the graduation the IPM planned to celebrate 125 years of its existence thus, they had to include Chirinda in the history of the church as the first woman pastor and celebrate her PhD degree in the church. The recognition for Chirinda came as a healing process after more than four decades of sobbing and suffering in the hands of Patriarchy ruling. Her election as leader of the Lusophone chapter enabled her to participate in trainings in Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Benin, Angola and Mozambique where senior members of the Circle were always present (Chirinda Essay, 2022).

## **Lessons from Chirinda's Theological Journey**

Chirinda in her life journey that was full of challenges, she walked and lived the denunciation of social and missionary historical context of oppression with the hope that one day church and society would reflect and liberate its members. In that regard, they would be transformed to be faithful and welcoming institutions and practitioners of faith, hope and justice, especially, the church that supposed to be the amplifier on action for justice and be a voice of the oppressed and downtrodden in the public

space following Jesus' footsteps, {Luke 4:18}. Hence Phiri and Haddad (2003), highlighted that education should be geared towards women empowerment and could entail the redefinition and transformation of the African culture which is practiced even in the Christian church in a way that will be a life giving to all members both men and women. This concept by the two theologians is relevant to the Oduyoye theory of the "Ministry as Partnership of both men and women".

Chirinda's life journey although she was not among the Circle Pioneers in Ghana in 1989 her work and contributions toward the objective of 1989 matriarchy group are testimonies of what she has done to women livelihoods of Mozambique. Her life journey portrays what one can call a theology of leadership, transform and transformed for transformation. Meaning, that through the mentorships by Musa Dube and other matriarchy mingling with Chirinda entirely transformed her for the transformation of the communities where she worked with in Mozambique and other countries. "Just brute to fore my story of violence and pain, that experience helped me to grow while claiming my dignity and respect" (Chirinda, 21 May 2022).

## CONCLUSION

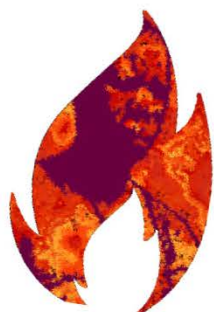
Today, the Circle's impact and influence grounded its roots in Mozambique, because of the fearless woman of God Chirinda. In other words, it is safe to say, Chirinda's work transformed many lives and continued as a leader for the Mozambique group and Southern Africa Region of circle of concerned women theologians. Leadership positions appointed or elected to Chirinda empowered her to work for the Mozambique Communities, including through the CIRCLE and AACC. The acts by Circle sisters encompassed concerns of Chirinda and of communal wellness through her leadership.

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## 22 | Home and Homeless: Cheryl Dibeela Crossing Racial, Gender and Religious Boundaries

*Cheryl Dibeela* & *Prince Dibeela*

### Abstract

This article is a social biographical approach in its intent. The chapter explores the intersection of boundary-crossing, homelessness, alienation and in-between spaces with race, gender and religion as I have experienced it both in my adopted home in Botswana and my home of birth, which is South Africa. I met my husband at the Federal theological Seminary in 1989. Our meeting was fateful because it led to our marriage. In our youth we did not see any potential hurdles on the way ahead. All we saw was hope, blissful love and a coming together of two different cultures. However, this meeting led to cultural and spiritual turbulences which this article reflects on. The people I have been married into became my people. Yet at the same time I have always been aware of othering innuendos. The article focuses on belonging yet feeling a sense of being in a 'strange land.' By the same token the article reflects on the strangeness of being home. Being away from family and the community in which I (Cheryl) was hewn, has had its cultural disconnect. Returning home to the so-called coloured community always brought contradictions in my life. I would always be looking forward to returning to my folks in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Yet for some reason after a couple of days there, I would want to return to my adopted home--Botswana. In this chapter, I explore the persistence of feeling like a stranger in both homes/countries—the sense of alienation and living in between spaces and belonging nowhere. Utilizing the gender category, I explore how marriage is an act of self-limitation for the woman, for it is them who must be uprooted and transported to a new culture, and sometimes a new country. It is the woman who should learn the new culture, who should say 'your people will be my people and your God will be my God.'

**Keywords:** Boundary-crossing, homelessness, alienation, apartheid, women leaders, African Christianity, marriage, African studies, home, in-between spaces, race and gender

## Introduction

The writer of the gospel of Matthew tells a piece about Joseph having to take his family to flee to Egypt. Effectively this means that Jesus became a refugee as an infant. This is how he puts across this narrative; "When the magi had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up!" he said. "Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him" (Matt2:13).

This mostly meant that this family had to sneak in as illegal migrants as there would not have been time to follow the necessary procedures when one travels to a foreign country. According to the Matthean narrative Jesus, and his family, were foreign nationals during his childhood days. This Christological view is critical for our discussion in this paper. Human existence is characterized by travels, cross-cultural engagements and intersectional experiences.

Being a traveler or a refugee does not make one self-sufficient as a human being. Self-sufficiency, I believe, goes against the principles of the Christian faith. This image of God as the travelling God, especially to across cultural and language borders remind us that this is what we are called to be. This is demonstrated by Mark's favorite Christological statement, "And Jesus crossed over to the other side..." (Mk 5:21). Mark is deliberate in presenting Jesus as one who was not territorial and who could not be domesticated by culture and the socio-political contexts of the time. In like manner people of faith ought to be those who are always going beyond themselves to cross-over to embrace the other.

I was born in Qheberha (Port Elizabeth) in South Africa. My ontological existence is that my body, the colour of my skin, is itself the embodiment of racial, ethnic and class intersectionality. This is because having been born as a person of mixed descent, otherwise known as colored in the Southern African context, this carries with it much political and theological connotations that follow me wherever I go. My upbringing was in an exclusively so-called colored community in apartheid South Africa of the seventies and eighties. Clearly, we were inheritors of different nationalities as a family. Whilst our real history was blurred because of the deliberate obfuscation of identities by the apartheid system, we knew that our ancestors were of Xhosa, Dutch and Malay origins. Yet interestingly though, there was always a pride in the European side of our racial his-

tory. There was a sense in which the Dutch heritage was seen and presented as though it was the dominant identity in our rather complicated personality. There was never any effort or interest in trying to dig-out our African or Asian historical identities. If anything, there was a shame associated with these non-European identities. We were taught to speak Afrikaans and some English but not any African language or culture. Anything to do with being African was seen as devaluing who we are as a family and as a wider community designated by this apartheid system as 'colored.' This was, of course, in accordance with the ideology and economy of apartheid South Africa.

### **Problematizing the Colored Notion**

The difficulty and burden that I carried throughout by childhood and youth days was to proudly embrace this so-called colored identity. This particular 'racial identity' did not seem natural. It always felt like an artificial aberration designed by the apartheid system to suit its grand imaginings. Somehow it always felt like we as a people were used by the system to validate its existence. As a so-called colored person one was neither white nor black. We existed in this racial hollowness that made one to remain identity-less in their own home country.

This reference to 'so-called' coloured was a contradiction, because you never thought of yourself as a so-called coloured — you thought of yourself as a coloured. The community was completely suspended between the blacks and the whites. My only memories of blacks were of the bogeyman who was going to catch you at night: *Tie boetie kom jou tang kom slaap.* I had no contact with black people, and what was amazing is that on the other side of the road were the Langa [African workers'] hostels. People ask me what is apartheid all about — this is what apartheid is: to have people living on the other side of the road or the railway line or the hill, and not to have any kind of human contact or recognize the person on the other side as a human being (SAHA 2015:2).

We were made to loathe and reject our blackness because, according to this system, it represented backwardness, slothfulness, viciousness and insane aspects of the human being. For some reason this was drilled effectively into the psyche of our parents who made a good point to socialize us well in rejecting our blackness. As indicated above, whilst we lived a stone throw from black communities we never played with black children, and we were reprimanded for using black or African languages. To

show that we were smart, we had to speak either Afrikaans or English as these languages represented a grander civilization. Whilst the apartheid system wired us to reject blackness, they nevertheless ingrained in our minds that whiteness was not attainable by us. It was a mere mirage that we could only aspire for. In other words, whilst we were not as backward and unintelligent as black folks, we should not think that we were at the same level as white folks (King 1994:150).

So one grew up in-between worlds. We did not belong to any of the major racial trajectories. This was for me and many others who are of mixed descent traumatic. We were made to reject African culture, yet we existed in the very womb of this cultural milieu we so much scorned. We aspired for a world we could never belong to, which in anyway did not want us. We were too pale, and our bodies represented and reminded the imperial white system of its historical evils. We were and continue to be a reminder of the rape, plunder and the slave trade visited upon humanity by the dominant white imperialists. To this day this spiritual *woundedness* is visible among the so-called colored communities in South Africa and the neighboring countries. These communities are ravaged by violence, drunkenness, gang wars, squalor and just drifting along. Sadly, the pioneers of this system are now sitting comfortably in their safe spaces and pontificating, blaming so-called colored and black communities for being uncivilized hence the hubbub in their communities.

## **Intersectionality and theological training**

I grew up and was spiritually socialized in the United Congregational Church in Southern Africa, in the Eastern Cape. I was groomed by progressive church ministers such as Revds Jakes Alberts, Roxanne Jordaan, Sam Arends, Joseph Wing, Templeton Mahlinza and many others. At an early age I gained critical consciousness and felt called to the ministry of the word and sacrament. In 1988, at the age of 21, I left my home to begin theological studies at the Federal Theological Seminary in Pietermaritzburg. This was the beginning of my consciousness and becoming part of the travelling God. My life would never be the same again. The very entry into the seminary was a *pneumatological* protest against the group areas abnormality and the apartheid scandal. The spirit of God blew and drove me to this liberative community where for the first time in my life I communed with people from diverse ethnic, linguistic and racial backgrounds (John 3:8). This was most liberating, and it thrust me into a new

understanding of being Christian and liberating power of the gospel of Jesus the Palestinian. Here I met black people who were, contrary to the mendacities that had been drilled into my head, decent and God-fearing people. One of those was a young man by the name Moiserale Prince Dibeela who was a Motswana. He became my best friend as we studied together and participated in the anti-apartheid struggle through the activities of the United Democratic Front (UDF). We would go together to listen to great speeches by the anti-apartheid luminaries such as Winnie Mandela, Harry Gwala, Frank Chikane and Bishop Khoza Mgojo. We toyi-toyed together against the apartheid system and Prince would always hold my hand so that I wouldn't get lost in the crowds. We participated in fasting in solidarity with the political prisoners who had embarked of a hunger strike. As God would have it, I fell in love with Prince and married him on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1989. This was despite the objections of my parents and some within the church family who felt that an interracial marriage such as the one we planned to go into would never survive. Apartheid was still in force and people so us as needlessly recalcitrant. Some students became hostile to Prince and even called him unpleasant names. My family tried to pressurize the then Principal of the Seminary, Rev Joseph Wing, to try and prevent the marriage. Fortunately, he took our side and refused to succumb to the pressure. Prince has today been my husband for thirty-three years.<sup>1</sup>

The Federal Theological Seminary became the embodiment of intersectionality. Here not only was the seminary a microcosm of South African society, it was also a liberating space for re-reading the Bible, inherited theologies and human histories. Through the radical scholarship of this institution I was able to feel liberated from the debilitating racialization that had left me feeling that I did not belong. I began to appreciate scripture as a tool that is life affirming. As Jione Havea says; "Scripture makes people live, think, grow, review, love, hate, age and die" (2019:1).

This liberation experience enabled me to go back in time and identify with Jesus the Palestinian who was himself a person of mixed descent, belonging to a world not dissimilar to the one I came from. He had been born into the Roman Empire and had to be a refugee as an infant because of the madness of Herod. In our context PW Botha was the Herod. He was brutal in enforcing the apartheid system and tried his best to keep us

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<sup>1</sup> Prince and I have two children, Lorato and Tumelo who are now adults and both live in Johannesburg with their families

divided and ignorant of each other. The boy children were killed ruthlessly under PW Botha just as had been the case under Herod (Matthew 2:16-18). Many of them ran to neighboring countries whilst many others joined the armies of the Liberation Movement, especially APLA and the Umkhonto we Sizwe. Many more were locked in prisons, and some even given the death penalty. Of course, they were women in these armies, however, the young men were the majority in these military movements. Here theological intersectionality meant a liberating movement in time and space that could not be confined to the apartheid structures. My world became surprisingly and liberatingly similar to that of the first century Roman Empire. Somehow, I felt a sense of proximity and solidarity with that so-called colored by the name Jesus of Nazareth. I no longer felt I existed in that racial hollowness that made me feel I did not belong.

Further, at the Federal Theological Seminary I was introduced to the work and activism of Steve Biko who was brutally killed by the apartheid system in 1977. He exposed the falsehood that was the racial categorization of people on the basis of the apartheid system. According to Steve Biko the human race was divided only on two categories which were black and white. The color black represented the class condition of people who have been oppressed and economically plundered by successive white imperialist regimes. The idea that there was a racial group called colored was a mere ploy to divide Black folks who were historically the underclass. The idea that there were different from darker Africans betrayed the chicanery that sought to divide and weaken the resistance of the oppressed. Whiteness represented privilege, exclusivity, illegitimate gain and imperial domination of those that did not belong to this racial category.

Through these experiences theology as a discourse became a liberating vehicle to traverse space, history and phenomena without being locked in particular imperial epistemologies. I took off the coat of being called colored and identified as a black person of mixed descent. As Steve Biko argues, I came to understand that, "Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude. Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being" (1978:61).

This was to some extent class-suicide on my part. Other so-called colored folks clung to this false identity as they saw it as more honorable and a ticket for survival in Apartheid South Africa. However, I felt it was liberating to embrace my blackness and to be part of the struggle for emancipation and building a non-racial society.

I also embraced many other identities. I identified with the Syrophenician Woman who had the nerve to confront patriarchy as expressed by Jesus, and was affirmed by him instead of being punished (Mark 7:24-30). It dawned on me and became ingrained in my consciousness that as women we cannot expect liberation at the mercy of men. Like the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, we must push our way through crowded spaces such as in institutions of learning, in churches and demand or even snatch our liberation (Luke 8:43-48). In my academic and theological journey, I found myself at odds with received ecclesiologies, traditional theologies and biblical scholarship. I came to the recognition that, "The life of faith will be a life of history and conflict, a life that sees that no neutrality is possible, and recognizes that revolutionary praxis can lead to theological creativity, in which a new reading of the Bible and the Christian tradition can emerge" (Brown, 1978:59).

Beyond this, I met in scripture many women, my sisters and mothers, who I had hitherto not heard of in the sermons. I was fed with in my beloved Congregationalist church. I met the subversive pair whose names are Shiprah and Puah, without whom there would never have been the Exodus experience (Exodus 1:15-21). Yet for some reason they are ignored by hermeneuticians and homeleticians alike who would rather choose to focus on Moses, Aaron and Jethro. I met Hannah, the Matriarch of the prophetic tradition whose commitment to the worship of Yahweh is demonstrated in her struggle through humiliation by a culture that taunts women who have challenges to do with child bearing (1 Samuel 1:1-8). Yet she emerges as a woman of valor and spiritual tenacity. Through her the word of God is heard again through the enunciation of her son Samuel and a subsequent generation of militant prophetic preachers. Through my new theological experience, I met many other women in the Bible whose role had hitherto been minimized, sidelined and even maligned.

Theological training also introduced me to a movement of women who have come out to challenge patriarchy, colonialism and other life-denying forms. I soon found myself in the company of sisters and mothers such as Musa Dube, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Sarojini Nadar and many others.

These became the light that brightened the dark crevices of sexism and offered glimpses of hope for the journey. Through their readings of scripture the biblical text became a 'site of struggle,' for power, for voices of women to be heard and for a more inclusive society (Dube and Staley, 2002:10).

## **On the Journey with the Travelling God**

If one understands travelling as applied to life and the implications it has on our lives, then one can understand God's image as the Traveler. Scripture is filled with people who are wandering from one area to the other. Some travel out of their own volition while others have no choice. One can think of several stories related in the Bible. The Israelites and the Exodus experience (Exodus 12:31ff); Jacob who was the brother to Esau. He eventually deceived his whole family especially his father Isaac who was at an old age into believing that he was Esau and stole his birth right (Gen 27:29). He then had to move away because conflict ensued, and he ended up at Laban's well (Genesis 27:41ff). Joseph who was human trafficked by his brothers due to jealousy and ended up in Egypt in the house of Potiphar (Genesis 37:12ff). Hagar, an Egyptian woman worked in a foreign land as a domestic servant to a rich man named Abraham and his wife Sarah. Hagar became Abraham's concubine when it was clear that Sarah was barren. Ishmael was born out of this relationship. Hagar ultimately had to flee into the wilderness of Beersheba with her son Ishmael (Genesis 16). Then there is Ruth, the Moabite. Ruth and Orpah, two young Moabite women, joined Naomi and her family who settled in Moab to escape a famine in Judah. They were married to the sons of Elimelech and Naomi. Both women were widowed at a young age. Ruth decided to remain with her husband's mother, whilst Orpah decided to return home. These are just a few examples of people that moved from one setting to the other. All of the above characters, seemed to have a conversion or transformational experience through their travelling.

In my case, on completion of my theological studies, at which point I was already married to my husband, I was placed to be minister in charge of a group of churches in central Botswana. It helps to be a youth because I had no inhibitions and felt ready to conquer the spiritual and socio-political demons I could face. We were a young couple and had agreed between us that ours would be a ministry based on a partnership of equality,

respect and transformative leadership. We came into a situation of a ministry that was dominated by older men who had set standards that were exclusively male. In order to be a minister one had to be male, or at least an old woman, and had to be able to offer an unpaid selfless service because they were called by God. My husband and I felt as though we were traversing an ecclesiological space that put us between two worlds. We had a vision that our being together was a gift of a partnership of marriage that placed upon us a big responsibility to set a new standard for a new understanding of being church. We talked a lot about this, how we would do things together, support one another, model an example of marriage that would demonstrate discipleship. Many people had wondered whether I would manage my ministerial placement in Mabeleapudi, Tshimoyapula, Mmashoro and Paje. However, God had equipped me not only with a theological qualification, my stubborn character and commitment to the liberating God, but had also given me a partner in marriage who was an integral part of my ministry. We both agreed that ministry was and ought to be a liberating space, where both women and men are co-participants in communion with the travelling God. During this time in this group of churches we were at all times stared at by death because of the experience of HIV and AIDS in the country. We had to preach healing and hope, advocate for sexual reproductive health, get involved in the formation of multi-sectoral community structures to combat HIV and AIDS, and we had to weekly conduct funerals to send off the departed. This appeared effortless to outsiders, and many appreciated this ministry couple. They put a lot of demands on us as we represented something of an exotic ecclesiastical experience. We conducted many marriages together, facilitated workshops together and did many other things together. When I became expectant with our second child, by which time we had moved to Gaborone and I was the Minister at Broadhurst Congregational Church, Prince initially took on a lot of my ministerial responsibilities. However, it soon appeared that some members of the church preferred a male minister than a woman who was evidently pregnant. Once this became apparent, we agreed that he would step back so that I perform my duties as a Minister. I put on my clerical garments and baptized young and old, presided at communion, did pastoral visits and preached the word of God. Some people silently objected and some even stayed away from Holy Communion saying they could not receive from a pregnant woman. When they could not get the acquiescence of my husband to their hushed demurrals the small group

started having nocturnal meetings with my predecessor who was a male minister. Sadly, these were women who were being used by a male individual to undermine the ministerial leadership of woman minister. This, to a large extent, became the story of my life in subsequent years. A story of the oppressed being used as tools to serve the interests of patriarchal agendas.

## **Migration, Cross-cultural ministry and Intersectionality**

Travelling also takes one outside of one's comfort zone. When one takes the decision to leave their familiar surroundings, they place upon themselves a self-limitation. They will most likely communicate in a different language, or have to engage in a new accent, and even a new social idiom that they are not familiar to. From 1998 to 2001 my husband started working as a Mission Enabler in the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. We were based in Leicestershire and we both struggled with the complex accent of area. The children quickly adapted to the new accent and the environment. However, it took us quite a while before we were able to let go of our defend guards. We missed home, the familiar foods, friends and the comfort of our church culture. It soon dawned on us that we were different. We were the other. We often had to be patronized and given false sympathy because we came from Africa. However, we also enjoyed radical hospitality that we were not accustomed to. We were used to a hospitality culture that is selective and gave preference based on categories such as race, gender and nationality. We were humbled to learn of the radical hospitality in the United Reformed Church, which was embedded in their ecclesiology which had the self-understanding that we should always have the stranger among us. They valued the voice of the other. This is something that should become a permanent feature of any Christian community. There ought to be a structured system of always having the door open for the stranger. There are many Christians who restrict themselves to their families, clan and denomination. This way they inadvertently deny themselves of the joy of being ministered to by the stranger.

While in the UK I did my Masters Programme with DE Montfort University and later worked as a community liaison officer for the Methodist Church in Leicester. As Mission Partners, we enjoyed the privileges of being in the protection of the ecclesiastical agencies that had facilitated our travel to the UK. However, the reality of being a foreigner stays with you all the time. We worked in churches that were predominantly Caucasian

where it was always assumed that we had run away from some bad political or economic situation where we had come from. We also had effects of our own internalized oppression as we assumed that the churches, we were serving would be vibrant with a knowledge base that would exceed that of those from whence we came. However, this was an erroneous assumption. It soon became apparent at the lack of knowledge of key components of the Christian faith. The disjuncture between what we perceived as the Christian west and what was the reality was astounding. At seminary the knowledge industry was dominated by Western scholars such as Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Walter Bruggemann, Leslie Newbegin, and many others. However, it was shocking to see big Victorian churches that were most of the time almost empty, with an elderly membership. Even more shocking was the lack of understanding of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. This was mind boggling taking into consideration that for over two centuries the West had transported a whole industry of Christian Education to the countries of the South. Interestingly, the church in the UK and in the North in general had very little knowledge of the key tenets of the Christian faith. Remarkably, we found our experience as walking the indigenous British folks in the basics of faith. It became a humbly experience to teach and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the savior and liberator. Though we were strangers in a strange land the ecclesiastical landscape we found ourselves in gave us the opportunity to adapt and fuse our experiences of both the north and the south. It soon became apparent that the pedestal we put our sisters and brothers in the North is a result of two hundred years of imperialism. However, at the basic level they are as vulnerable, ignorant, fretful, fearful, hopeful and searching for peace, security and joy like human beings everywhere.

In my role as Community Liaison Officer I worked with asylum seekers, especially from Zimbabwe. This was at the height of the political turmoil around the land question in Zimbabwe. This work was a painful experience at two levels. First, there were black and white asylum seekers, and both groups came from Zimbabwe. White Zimbabweans walked into the United Kingdom and either just got their British citizenship reinstated or their asylum status granted through a seamless process. For black Zimbabweans, it was a very different story. Many of them were kept in detention centres for long periods of times, others were sent to so-called third-countries, whilst many others were returned to Zimbabwe to face

the wrath of the political fury of the time. We worked with those in detention centres and those who were in the country waiting to be granted an asylum status so that they can stay freely in the country. At the Methodist Church we did our best to arrange for hearings for them, to register those that were illegal immigrants and to provide basic necessities as food and clothing. What compounded this experience was the sheer numbers that we had to deal with. There were many folks that had fled their country, and had come to Britain not only because they could speak English as citizens of a country that had hitherto been a British colony, but because Britain was at the centre of the land debacle in Zimbabwe. The ethnic divide between the Shona and the Ndebele was the vividly evident. Imperialism as all forms of dominant systems do, works and thrives on divide and rule. British imperialism had perfected this system in Africa, and its manifestations were now evident here on British soil. To combat this imperialistic malevolence, we embarked on a series of Bible studies on key Biblical themes such as ‘who is my neighbor?’ ‘The woman at the well,’ ‘Remember you were once strangers in Egypt,’ ‘Singing the Lord’s song in a strange land’ and many others. It was a major breakthrough to facilitate the different ethnic groups to sit together and engage each other. This took a lot of tack, patience and prayerful engagement to get to the point where these ethnic groups could start accepting each other as people fellow citizens of equal worth.

## **Working among the poor and vulnerable**

At the end of our stint in the UK in 2001 we returned to Botswana where, with the assistance of my husband, I started a community ministry through an organization called Mabogo Dinku Advice Centre. The radical Jesus, whom I had been introduced to at the Federal theological Seminary and through my ministry over the years, transmuted my ministry. I now felt called to the streets of Gaborone to commune among the homeless boys who lived in the Main Mall. I felt the urge to work among sex workers, survivors of gender-based violence, those who had been imprisoned through a system that favoured the powerful who had money to buy the justice system. Through Mabogo Dinku our doors were opened in 2002 to all those who needed someone to talk to about their situation. Ours was to lend them a listening ear minus any moral judgement. People came through and poured their hearts about their dysfunctional families, abuse in church, victims of rape came through and many others.

The majority were young people who had dropped out of school and had nothing to do. In a lot of cases we listened to our clients and then referred them to other services such as counsellors, social workers and other civic society organizations. We built a partnership with the Social Services Department who were very supportive of the work we were doing. On one occasion we had a client who was a sex worker and had come to us because her son who was only ten had confronted her about her lifestyle. He said if she did not change her life of going out at night, he was going to commit suicide. She was particularly traumatized by the fact that he knew what she was doing. Every time she sneaked out, she thought to herself that he was too young to understand what she was up to. So, she came around and needed assistance with getting a regular job so she could quit being a sex worker. We called one of our contacts who was a lay pastor in one of the churches and was also running a business. We requested that he employ her in some clerical role and he agreed. Unfortunately, when he came around so we could introduce him to her she froze and indicated that she didn't want the job anymore. We were shocked and disappointed at what seemed like an ungrateful attitude. However, she later divulged to us that she couldn't work for him because he was one of her clients. This was outrageously obnoxious.

Through the work at Mabogo Dinku Advice Centre we decided to establish an offshoot organization called Sedibeng Skills Centre<sup>2</sup>. The focus here was to equip young people with technical and life skills. We managed to organize opportunities for the young people to acquire skills in areas such as plumbing, thatching, electricals, welding and other construction related skills. Our long-lasting programme was a partnership we had with the Gaborone Sun Hotel. Through this programme the youth were placed at the hotel and given on the job training in hotel management. They would be trained in customer service, room service, culinary services and all other aspects of hotel management. The young people would be trained for six months, rotating in the different areas. Through this my ministry was nothing close to the conventional notion. However, every time I met members of the church, they would say how

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<sup>2</sup> When we moved to Johannesburg at the end of 2005 we donated the Mabogo Dinku Advice Centre to the Church, which included financial, movable assets and the social networks among which was an annual grant from the Social Services Department of the government of Botswana. Sadly, the organization collapsed after a couple of years.

they wished I could return to ministry. I always explained, to their dissatisfaction, that I never left the ministry. What I was doing, walking with the poor and marginalized was the ministry to which I was called. Mine was to respond to the evangelical injunction that “I was hungry and you did not give me food, I was thirsty and you did not give me water, I was in prison and you did not visit me (Matthew 25:35-40).” I was troubled by the one-dimensional approach to ministry that had developed over the years. The words of Professor John de Gruchy speak to the heart of the problem I had to wrestle with: “Part of the problem is that too often we understand the church more as a static institution that we have to maintain, or a set of divided institutions that we have to unite, rather than a community of persons in which Christ is present and through which Christ engages the world” (De Gruchy, 2012:14).

For me the church and the Mission of God should not be contained in human structures. It is a movement of the spirit that ought to be found in the whole of human existence. In 2005 I started an organization called Women at the Well. It is a fellowship and support system of women who are in ministry. Through this organization women in ministry in the UCCSA and our sister churches in the United Kingdom and the United States of America come together every other year to pray together, share experiences, learn together and plan. The gatherings bring together women ministers, evangelists and all others who are in ministry. It is always a time that we look forward to because it was our ‘girl time’, when we could debrief and lift each other up from the pits of patriarchy. The Women at the Well has done advocacy work within the church by encouraging women ministers to fight for justice and to raise their voice against all forms of sexism in the Church and society. It has also been a way through which we encourage solidarity among us as women. All systems of suppression function through divide and rule, and the church leadership sometimes selectively choose sisters who they use to soothe their conscious. This way they are able to tick the boxes or have a paragraph in their reports devoted to women representation. These women who are coopted often behave like ‘honorary men’ and more often than not they become a hindrance to gender justice. Through the Women at the Well we have been encouraging global solidarity among women ministers. We have also encouraged and pushed for scholarships for women ministers, and have even sponsored some to stand for positions in the Church. I had the privilege of traveling with some ministers to the United Kingdom and the USA for experiential learning purposes. Some of the ministers

that I have mentored through this process include Rev Corin Maboeta, Rev Zodwa Kakaza, Rev Felicia Ramaribana, Rev Johan Bezedenhout and many others. We have been trying, in the last few years, to make the Women at the Well ecumenically inclusive by inviting Presbyterian women ministers and Methodists. However, it is my hope that this will come to pass.

### **Intersectionality and 'global apartheid'**

Besides my activism and work among the poor and marginalized I also worked as Mission Enabler for the Council for World Mission, starting from 2007 to 2013. In this role I traversed different countries, cultures and languages. My work entailed travelling within Southern Africa; Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia. I also regularly visited continents such as Europe, Pacific, East and South Asia and the Caribbean. In the process I have become an advocate for justice through teachings, facilitator of workshops and participating in ecumenical actions for a justice and peace. Over the years it has become clear that the system of apartheid has over the years mutated and become a global phenomenon. It is manifest in the West and their warfare against Palestine. The USA and the European Union Countries have openly embraced a racist attitude to Palestine, and continually sponsor Zionist Israel in their brutality against the occupied territories of Palestine. Further, global apartheid is also apparent through immigration laws and practices. Nationals from countries of the North travel freely all of the world without needing visas. However, most countries of the South have to acquire visas, whether they are travelling to the North or even among countries of the South. The acquisition of Visas and other requirements is an added cost burden that makes travel a very expensive undertaking. Through these travels, I witnessed and experienced the suffering of people of the South as they are excluded, returned, humiliated and imprisoned because they come from wrong countries and wear the wrong skin pigmentation. The word of Mary Grey became potent in this situation:

“At root, faith in a God who suffers with us does not so much emerge from a philosophical rejection of the impassible, omnipotent and sufficient God, but from an experience with a double content: the experience of affliction, of radical suffering which threatens to destroy the sense of

being a person, and of the presence of God in this affliction” (although not always) (2001:57).

Apartheid survived for almost fifty years in South Africa partly because of the complicity of the oppressed with the oppressor. We had, embedded in our communities and even within the liberation struggle, structures and individuals who worked against us. These were people who were paid by the system to spy on those who were in the struggle to end apartheid. I raise this issue here to demonstrate that even global racism and the continuance of systems of domination continue because of the amenability of some among the oppressed.

Once I traveled with my Prince to Jamaica. At the end of more than thirty hours of travel we arrived in Kingston and were just keen to go straight to the hotel to rest. However, there was a young lady at the Immigration in the Airport who insisted that we needed a visa for Botswana passport holder. We tried to gently explain to her that Botswana passport holders did not need a visa to enter Jamaica, we had checked with the authorities and in any case, it wasn't the first time for my husband to visit the country. The young lady became adamant and flippantly told us to wait whilst she was helping out other customers, who were evidently white. We protested but to no avail. I then started, to her annoyance, humming Bob Marley's:

*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery  
None but ourselves can free our minds  
Have no fear for atomic energy  
'Cause none of them can stop the time  
How long shall they kill our prophets  
While we stand aside and look? Ooh  
Some say it's just a part of it  
We've got to fulfill the book.*

She became very furious with me and said, “Ma'am that's not funny!” To which my husband laughed out so loud and said, ‘But she's just appreciating a Jamaican icon.’

This is how racism and imperial systems perpetuate themselves. By indoctrinating us to hate ourselves and to hate anything that reflects who we are. It is the victims of the very system that oppress them who put every effort into making sure that it functions. Prof Musa Dube puts it this way, “Imperialism expounds an ideology of inferior knowledge and

invalid religious faith for those who must be colonized. Authoritative travelers depend heavily upon constructions of ignorant natives” (2002:67).

Today the world over, imperial education has conditioned us to suspect black people of being illegal immigrants, giving false information and likely to be transporting some illegal substance. It is often the case that when two people are travelling together, one being white and the other black, the latter is likely to be searched longer than the former. It doesn't matter what part of the world they might be travelling in, whether its Nairobi, Singapore or London, the attitude and response is the same. What is even more painful is when black people express the harshest forms of this racist culture on fellow black people. This self-hate is the embodiment of colonial ideology.

### **Intersectionality and being a stranger: concluding thoughts**

Through the education and experiences, I went through I became a global citizen. I became an embodiment of racial, gender, class and Global South intersectionality that could not be tamed and harnessed into limited spaces. As someone who is proud of where they come from, I have made regular trips to my home town Port Elizabeth (now known as Qheberha). Going back home was always something I looked forward to. However, once I am there for a few days I often feel a sense of not belonging, a sense that I am a stranger here. The racist undertones of the jokes about black people, the rejection of the government of the day simply because it's black and other undertones of my people, make me feel alienated in my own community. I would pick the subliminal intonations that 'why did you have to get married so far away?' 'Do we have to speak English all the time?' 'We are only comfortable with our mother tongue, which is Afrikaans.' These are undertones that often remind me that my community is a design of apartheid imperialism. I would immediately miss my husband and children. Whilst I was hewn from this community, I am now a global citizen whose citizenship is not determined by the color of one's skin. I belong to a citizenship that is anchored on commitment to social and racial justice, non-sexism, ethnic justice and a world where there is economic equity. Whilst I value my place of birth, I would often miss my marriage home, where the language and idiom of our household is respect and justice for all.

Being married in Botswana has been a joyful experience. There has not been any group areas act or any traces of the crudeness of apartheid. However, even here I often feel like a stranger. Often, I miss my language Afrikaans, I miss the customs of my people such as eating pickled fish and cross buns at Easter time. I miss seeing people who look like me so that I don't have to be stared at all the time, or put on a false pedestal as a '*lekgowa*' or white woman. I am tired of explaining to people in Botswana that I am not white but rather I am a 'black person of mixed descent.' Although I give praise to God for being married here where I have been received with such amazing love, I nevertheless still feel like a stranger. It feels to me like I belong to both worlds and yet at the same time I belong to neither.

## CONCLUSION

Her activism and strong character have over the years rubbed some in the Church leadership the wrong way. She spoke truth to power without mincing her words. This earned her the wrath of those in power in the Church system. In 2019 she was abruptly transferred from the church where she was minister in charge. She accepted the transfer with grace. However, she was deeply hurt by the fact that after the so-called transfer she was kept at home without being given a ministerial appointment. Nevertheless, she continued running her organization which she had started in 2015 known as Tswang Learning Communities (TLC). She did similar work she used to do at Sedibeng Skills Centre whereby she partnered with Education Training Providers and have out of school youth trained for free. Over the years she has facilitated the training of over a thousand youth in different industry competencies.

In September 2020, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic Dr Cheryl Dibeela became ill. She was diagnosed with a progressive neurological disease, which has seriously curtailed her functioning. She is at home in Gaborone, Botswana where she is receiving care and is kept comfortable by myself with the support of the children. She continued her work as a teacher and mentor for most of 2020 when she was still functional. At that time, she supported and mentored, from her sick bed, a young lady

who was an intern minister. The young lady, Rev Botho Hiri, is now ordained to the ministry of the word and sacrament. She also assisted me by addressing an online workshop of Sudanese women refugees who are based in Nairobi, Kenya. It is the greatest privilege to look after and care for Cheryl during her illness. She is an amazing servant of God and continues to demonstrate spiritual tenacity in the struggle for life.

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## AFTERWORD

### Mbuya Nehanda, die Säulen prophetischer Weisheit und die Flamme der Freiheit

Ein deutsches Gleitwort zum Abschluss der  
*CIRCLE JUBILEE VOLUMES* (BiAS 39–41/ ERA 13-15)

*Joachim Kügler*

Es ist für die Bibel-in-Afrika-Forschung der Universität Bamberg eine besondere Ehre, dass der wichtigste Zusammenschluss theologisch forschender Frauen in Afrika, der *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (in der internationalen Forschungsszene gemeinhin kurz *CIRCLE* genannt) seine Trilogie zum 35-jährigen Jubiläum in Kooperation mit dem Bamberger BiAS/ERA-Team herausgibt.

Das hängt nicht nur mit dem Renommee zusammen, das eine lange Reihe von afrikanischen Gastwissenschaftlerinnen (zumeist Stipendiatinnen der Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung) der Universität Bamberg als Forschungsstandort für die religionsbezogene Afrika-Forschung erworben hat, sondern auch mit den kontinuierlichen Forschungs Kooperationen, die sich daraus ergeben haben. So ist Rosinah Gabaitse, die als Humboldtianerin zwei Jahre in Bamberg geforscht hat und nun selbst botsuanische Gastgeberin für deutsche Humboldtianer fungiert, seit Jahren auch aktives Mitglied unseres Herausgeberkreises und hat den wichtigen Band zu Gender-Themen in Afrika mitherausgegeben (BiAS 22; <https://doi.org/10.20378/irbo-54678>). Für diesen Band ist sie eine Mitherausgeberin. Eine wichtige Rolle spielt auch Musa W. Dube, die als Humboldt-Preisträgerin in Bamberg geforscht hat – damals noch Professorin an der Universität von Botswana in Gaborone. Inzwischen ist sie in den USA tätig, fungiert als internationale Koordinatorin des *CIRCLES* und hat zu jedem Band ein Vorwort verfasst. Inzwischen gehört sie selbst zu den ‚Matriarchinnen‘ der afrikanischen Bibelwissenschaft und Religionsforschung und wird hier entsprechend gewürdigt.

Für das deutsche Publikum mag der Begriff der ‚Matriarchin‘, der in den drei Bänden häufiger vorkommt, etwas irritierend sein, weil wir Deut-

schen uns die Verehrung der Vergangenheit nach den verheerenden Erfahrungen des 20. Jahrhunderts weitgehend abgewöhnt haben. Dabei sollten wir aber nicht übersehen, dass das Unheil männlicher Herrschaft keineswegs die Vergangenheit generell abwerten muss. Es gilt aber, eine andere Sicht auf die Vergangenheit zu entwickeln, die sich nicht nur an den (Un-)Taten von Machtmännern orientiert, sondern an den Opfern und Gegenmächten. Dazu gehört eben auch der Widerstand und die Kreativität von Frauen. So erinnern die *Circle Jubilee Volumes* an die wichtigen Beiträge von Frauen zur Entwicklung afrikanischer Befreiungstheologie – einschließlich ihrer Kämpfe und Leiden. Und der Begriff der ‚Matriarchin‘ markiert nicht nur eine naive Verklärung der großen Frauengestalten der letzten 35 Jahre, sondern die realistische Einschätzung ihrer Widerstands- und Gestaltungskraft.

Als Integrations- und Leitfiguren wurden für die jeweiligen Regionalbände drei Ikonen gewählt: eine biblische und zwei außerbiblische. Bei der biblischen Gestalt handelt es sich um die *Königin von Saba* (BiAS 40), die in der Hebräischen Bibel ebenso wie im Neuen Testament vorkommt, und breite Anerkennung genießt. Ist sie in der Salomo-Erzählung (1 Könige 10,1-13; 2 Chronik 9,1-12) noch die Fremde, die der Weisheit Salomos Tribut zollt, so wird sie in der weiteren Rezeption zur Personifizierung weiblicher Weisheit, und in äthiopischen Quellen sogar zur Urmutter der königlichen Dynastie. Daneben sind zwei weitere, nichtbiblische Weisheitsikonen ausgewählt worden. Dabei handelt es sich zum einen um den weiblichen *Sankofa-Vogel* (BiAS 39), der in der Akan-Kultur Ghanas als weisheitliches Symbol für Zukunftsgestaltung durch den angemessenen Rückgriff auf die Vergangenheit steht. Zum anderen wird auf *Mbuya Nehanda*, eine Prophetin der Schona-Tradition Bezug genommen (BiAS 41). Damit ist nicht nur die historische Nehanda Charwe Nyakasi-kana (≈1840–1898) gemeint, die – nicht unumstritten – als Heldin im Kampf gegen die britische Kolonialmacht verehrt wird, sondern darüber hinaus die überzeitliche spirituelle Macht, die in ihr, in früheren und späteren Prophetinnen Gestalt gewinnt, so dass die widerständige Flamme der Freiheit und Selbstbestimmung nicht erlischt. So wünsche ich den drei Jubiläumsbänden auch im deutschsprachigen Raum viele interessierte Lesende, die bereit sind, sich von den Gründungsmüttern des *CIRCLE* und ihren Töchtern anregen zu lassen.

Und dem *CIRCLE* selbst gilt natürlich der herzliche Wunsch:

**AD MULTOS ANNOS!**



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BIAS 41/ ERA 15 completes the trilogy of volumes celebrating the jubilee of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (CIRCLE). This third part writes the history of theologian matriarchs in Southern Africa. The resistance from Southern-African women through their work in the CIRCLE affirms the spirit of the Zimbabwean medium and freedom fighter Mbuya Nehanda, and demonstrates the tradition of feminist intersectional liberation theology in the region. The authors encourage women and all suppressed to take up the spiritual flame of resistance.

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ISBN: 978-3-98989-001-5



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