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Theological Journey of Omega Bul : A Zambian Theologian

**In:**

Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Eds.), Nehanda : Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa (Circle Jubilee Volume 3), Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, S. 335-350. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

**Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion**

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96508

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

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## 19 | Theological Journeys of Omega Bula - A Zambian Theologian

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### **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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