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## **PREFACE : The Quest for Theological Wisdom Following the footsteps of the Queen of Sheba, Mama Walatta Petros and Kimpa Vita in the Quest for Feminist/Womanist Theological Space**

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## PREFACE

### The Quest for Theological Wisdom

Following the footsteps of the Queen of Sheba,  
Mama Walatta Petros and Kimpa Vita  
in the Quest for Feminist/Womanist Theological Space

*Musa W. Dube*

The East and Central African theological landscape features impressive figures of legendary spiritual women, who rose against both patriarchal and colonial powers and established powerful social movements of resistance. These historical women lay a very important foundation for East and Central African feminist and womanist movements as they claim their place in the public space. In am thinking here of the likes of Mama Walatta Petros of Ethiopia and Kimpa Vita of Democratic Republic of Congo. Walatta Petros (1572-1642) was born into Ethiopian Orthodox faith. When Roman Catholic missionaries came to her country, insisting on converting Ethiopians to their own kind of Christianity. Walatta Petros made it a point to publicly resist the colonial cultural movement. Mama Walatta stood her own ground against the Ethiopian Emperor and her husband who had succumbed to the Roman Catholic missionary imposition of western ways of practicing Christianity. She went to denounce her marriage, became a nun and founded a large popular following and communities in resistance of cultural imperialism. In 1672 a book (Hagiography) was written about her, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*, and she was elevated to the status of sainthood in the Ethiopian Othodox Church.

Kimpa Vita was born in 1684 in the Kongo Kingdom, which was then under the influence of Portuguese colonial culture. She was baptized Dona Beatrice in the Roman Catholic Church. Later, she claimed to be possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony. She proclaimed, among other things, that Jesus and his disciples were black Congolese, and that God would restore the Kingdom of Kongo. Kimpa Vita also called for the removal of white biblical art from the cathedral, pointing out that they were

as good as any fetish /pagan symbols. The prophetic message of Kimpa Vita obviously attacked racism/whiteness and its function in colonial settings. She resisted the empire, stating that the kingdom of the colonized will be restored. Kimpa Vita's message resonated with the oppressed masses of Kongo pulling off a massive following. Both her message and its impact threatened the colonial powers, who crucified and killed her in 1702. Her death did not end her movement, as she is credited with the beginning African Independent Churches in Africa (Dube 1996:111-129). Both Mama Wallatta and Kimpa Vita used spiritual capital to rise against colonial and patriarchal powers as well as national collaborating leaders, thereby laying the foundation for African Women theologians of East and Central African regions, to take their God-given right to pursue women's rights, communal rights and national rights to be free from all forms of oppression.

This volume, named after another legendary woman, the Queen of Sheba, is one of the three regional volumes commissioned in preparation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (henceforth Circle) return to its place of birth in July 1-5, 2004. 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 that particular volume on *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 exploring South, East/Central and West African women's liberation theologies generated since the launch of the Circle in 1989. These volumes are:

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

In addition to three regional volumes, the idea of producing thematic volumes was also birthed. The Circle thus commissioned continent and diaspora wide thematic volumes, focusing on biographies, ethics, philosophies, African Indigenous Religions, legendary African women, and Earth in African women's literature. The Circle also launched a creative writing volume, to engage its non-academic members and audiences on current environmental challenges, facing Mother Earth. All the volumes mark the journey back to Ghana, within which, *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation* is situated.

## **Background Sankofa 2024 Journeys and Queen of Sheba**

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 co-edited from the conference proceedings are listed in the reference below.

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

the executive committee decided that the theme for the forthcoming conference in Ghana will be “*Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion.*”

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

In July 2024, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians continental conference will therefore, return to Legon, Ghana, where the Circle was first launched in 1989. In accordance the 2019 chosen theme and the impact of Covid 19, research focus will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics 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 the short papers for the biographies volume, *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers*, the three regional volumes sought longer papers that enable deeper analysis to highlight the contributions of individual theologians and faith leaders. This volume therefore focuses on those women who made theological contributions through their research and publications or provided leadership in faith-related and ecumenical spaces. It does not seek to cover all women theologians; rather, it features those whose theological contributions are especially significant. The aim of this volume, therefore, is to make sure that by the July 2024 Ghana gathering regional contributions have been researched and published to map the way forward. Given this background, the statement of the problem, goals, specific objectives and research questions of this regional volume (which are the same as other regional volumes) are stated below.

## **Statement of the Problem**

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

words, are the effects, achievements, strengths, and weakness of African women theologies of liberation?

### **Goal**

Named after the legendary Ethiopian Queen, who visited King Solomon in search for wisdom, the volume reclaims her legacy for feminist liberational journeys in East and Central Africa. The volume, *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation* seeks to thoroughly investigate the theology/ies generated by the Circle Matriarchs of East and Central 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 histography in theology.

### **Specific Objectives**

*Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation* (through its authors) sought to deeply research theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of East and Central 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 *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Women's Theologies of Liberation* sought (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 East and Central African theological landscape stretches from African Indigenous Religions to legendary women leaders such as Queen of Sheba, Mama Walatta Petros, Kimpa Vita and to millions of everyday women who embrace one faith or another as their own way of living. In 1989, when Mercy Oduyoye called on African women to launch the Circle,

women from East and Central African countries such, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia heeded the call and became founding matriarchs of the Circle. These included Anne Kubai, Musimbi Kanyoro, Anne Nasimiyu Wasike, Betty Ekaya, Sr Bernadette Mbuy Beya, Nyambura Njoroge among others. Many more who did not go, but who received the agenda of the Circle, became the champions of its vision. These include Hazel Anyanga, Emily Onyango, Mary Getui, Esther Mombo, Philomena Mwaura, Hannah Kinoti, Damaris Paritau, Elisabeth Vibila, Faith Lugazia, Grace Wamue, among others. This volume recognizes the cultural theological roots of East and Central 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 East and Central Africa. Their introduction will highlight how the goal, specific objectives and the research questions are addressed by the volume. In so doing, they will point the whole Circle to the areas that need further consolidation and new explorations.

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