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Mother Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion : Pursuing Social Welfare and Human Rights in Southern Africa

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## **19 Mother Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion**

### **Pursuing Social Welfare and Human Rights in Southern Africa**

#### *Abstract*

Mother Earth hosts all members of the creation community. This common home makes members of the Earth community siblings and, inevitably, family. Their interconnectedness, however, does not automatically guarantee the rights of the Earth as the hosting mother; nor does it guarantee the rights of the women, animal and plant family. This chapter will explore the interface of Earth Crisis, Pandemics, Human rights and the role of religion in Southern Africa. It will weave Southern Africa narratives of the struggle for liberation and postcolonial disappointments with national, gender, health and Earth justice dream narratives. The essay will draw primarily, but not exclusively, from the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, who have centered the theme Earth, Gender and Pandemics as their research focus in the past two decades.

**Keywords:** *Earth, Pandemics, Gender, Religion, Climate Change*

### **1. Introduction: Beautiful Dreams of a Beautiful Future**

Dear Joachim K ugler, please join us to remember that proud and profound moment in Southern African history, and indeed for the whole world community, when the new South Africa constitution was launched on May 8, 1996. It was a proud moment and a turning point for the world community, given the number of energies, resources, dreams and prayers that were invested to dismantle the Apartheid regime, a racial economic system that structurally discriminated and exploited people based on the

color of skin. The new constitution was famed as the most progressive, or even the finest constitution in the world at the time. While the whole world was watching and listening, the then Vice President of the South African Republic, Thabo Mbeki, broke into one of the most beautiful and well-crafted Earth-Centered poems, stating:

I am an African  
 I owe my being to the hills and valleys, the mountains and the glades,  
 the rivers and the deserts, the trees and the flowers,  
 the seas and ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native  
 land.

My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter-day snows  
 It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine  
 And melted in the heat of the midday sun  
 The crack and the rumble of the summer thunders  
 Lashed by startling lightening  
 have been a cause for both trembling and hope  
 The fragrances of nature have been as pleasant to us as the sight of  
 the wild blooms  
 Of the citizens of the veld.

The dramatic shapes of the Drakensberg,  
 The soil-colored waters of Lekoa, Qilli, NoThukela  
 And the sands of the Kgalagadi....

At times, and in fear, I have wondered, whether I should concede  
 equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the ele-  
 phant and the Springbok, the hyena, the black Mamba, and the pes-  
 tilential mosquito

A Human presence among all these, a feature on the face our native  
 land, thus defined, I know that none dare challenge me when I say I  
 am an African (Mbeki 1996).

His poem then turned from animal and plant world to focus again on  
 human beings. In the political context that was guided by the South Afri-  
 can truth and reconciliation, Mbeki's poem continues to say:

I am an African  
 I owe my being to the Khoi and San  
 I am formed of the migrants who left Europe  
 In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slave  
 Who came from the east  
 I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women  
 of the Huntsa and Sekhukhune (Mbeki, 1996).

The moment of the poem's performance was a great day in celebration of the new South African democracy, for it was formed on the back of a long struggle against the Apartheid regime. Its new constitution was born on the back of many world democracies and the various movements for human rights. It was informed by the histories of many groups who lived in countries that proclaimed democracy but denied the human rights to some of their citizens based on gender, race, age, sexuality, indigeneity. The new South African constitution thus set out to protect the rights of all its members. Thabo Mbeki's poem, therefore, underlines the importance of the unity of humanity fighting against the monstrous structure of the Apartheid regime, which exploited both the land and black people based on their race. Mbeki also points out that he is a grand child of the warriors who fought for the liberation of the native land and people, thus reclaiming the history of liberation, from the colonial contact zone.

"To his great credit, Mbeki firstly begins by acknowledging 'Mother Earth.' He centers his poem on the importance of the land. Given that 1913 Native Land Act, debarred black South Africans from owning land... he begins by acknowledging the land as supreme, stating that he owes his being to 'the hills and valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers and the deserts, the trees and the flowers, the seas and ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land.' In putting the Earth first in celebration of freedom and rights, Mbeki acknowledges that celebrating independence for the formerly colonized, is not just freedom for human beings, but also for the land itself." (Dube, 2024, p. 1).

This earth-centred framework of liberation highlights that when the people suffer, the land also suffers. It underlines that colonization is the subjugation and exploitation of the land and its inhabitants. In his classic book titled, "*The Wretched of the Earth*" Frantz Fanon (Fanon, 2001, p. 34) argues that for the colonized people the most important thing is the land,

since it is the land that gives them dignity and honour (Masenya and Ramantswana, 2015, pp. 96–116). Mbeki underscores this a fundamental truth; namely, that human beings are interconnected to the land, and they are not above or apart from all other members of the Earth community. Mbeki's poem underlines that just as the people of South Africa want to enjoy their freedom and fundamental human rights, they should begin first by granting the same to rights to Mother Earth. It is the liberation of Mother Earth which grants them peace and prosperity in the envisioned New South Africa.

The second point to note, dear Joachim Kügler, is the identity that Mbeki constructs. He claims a very hybrid human identity, stating that his blood is a mixture of European migrants, Asians and Africans. He presents himself as related to all the racial groups of his new nation. Mbeki was in the delivery room, labouring to give birth to a new South African nation that celebrates the humanity of each and all of its members! In this space, there is neither a European, Asian nor African, for they are all one under their new nation. It was a dream. He was enacting Nelson Mandela's statement; namely, that, "my freedom and yours cannot be separated." This freedom is not only based on liberating interconnectedness between people of different races and ethnicities, but it is also based on interconnect- edness between people and the land, plants and animals. Mbeki was grounding his dream for a new nation on the philosophy of Ubuntu, which asserts that, "I am because we are" (Dube et al., 2024, pp. 1–4). As South African scholar Puleng LenkaBula has elaborated, Ubuntu is not just a philosophical call to build and live in communities that uphold the humanity of the other and all, rather, it is also a philosophical position that bids us to live in creation community, realizing that we owe our being not just to fellow humans, but also to plants and animals (LenkaBula, 2008, pp. 374–394). Mbeki's poem, "I am an African," seeks to articulate the interconnectedness between human beings and the Mother Earth as a whole. The new South Africa that he envisions is thus grounded upon the inclusive and liberating philosophy of Ubuntu. It was a dream, a beautiful dream.

We, the writers, come from the Southern Africa region and are part of this story. We spent a great deal of our time during the 60s to the 90s in an

intensified quest for the liberation of black people in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Eswatini, and Lesotho. We sought liberation for the lands and the people of Southern Africa (Dube, 2020, pp. 1–8). We sang liberation songs and we danced to liberation drums. We shook up our fists in the air and demanded, “Mayibuye iAfrica” (let Africa return). We chanted *a luta continua*. The songs and chants of liberation still ring in our ears. We dreamt beautiful dreams of liberation. I, Musa W. Dube, was born in Botswana to Zimbabwean migrant parents. My parents moved from Zimbabwe to Botswana because black people in Zimbabwe were dispossessed of their lands by the white settler colonizers of the time. They were moved to arid and crowded lands or given the option to stay in their original settlements, with new status as servants of the white masters who now proclaimed themselves the rightful owners the lands of Zimbabwe (Dube, 2014, pp. 139–140). I, Kenosi Molato, was born in Botswana to the descendants of the riparian people of the Okavango Delta, who arrived on the shores of the delta with canoes from Angola, fleeing from the atrocities of the deadly Angolan wars. Thus, the Okavango Delta became their refuge from these atrocities (Molato, 2020, p. 4–5).

In the early 1990s, when South Africa finally gained her independence from its settler Apartheid minority regime, we were very much looking forward to a time to re-build our region, communities, economies and to stabilize our young nations. We were looking for a time of peace and prosperity. We were looking forward to build and rebuild our nations. We had not foreseen the impending pandemics of neo-colonialism, HIV and AIDS, COVID-19, Global warming, and the neoliberal-economy. These new structures put further challenges on our young nations that were still learning to accept each other beyond the ethnic identities. Some young nations such as Mozambique, Angola and DRC regressed into wars. Other national leaders regressed into dictatorship while others faced continued struggle to regain their lands from settler colonisers, like in Zimbabwe and South Africa; and many others were reeling under the World Bank and IMF induced structural adjustments and debts. It is within this political and economic landscape of dire inequalities that pandemics and climate change further complicate the quest for liberation of all in South-

ern Africa countries. Indeed, only four years from his beautiful poetic introduction to the RSA constitution, Mbeki came under fire, for undermining the importance of providing ARVs for people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) (Boseley, 2000).

## 2. Exploding the Hijacked Dream

Dear Joachim Kügler, in this chapter, we hope to share with you some snapshots on the third struggle for liberation.<sup>1</sup> This is the struggle for liberation in the face of the devastating impact of climate change, HIV & AIDS, COVID-19, and Gender-Based Violence. These new oppressive structures have shattered our dream for liberation and demoralized our societies. In the words of Langston Hughes, our dreams became “deferred dreams.” As Langston Hughes asks:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
Like a raising in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore...?  
And run.  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over, like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags, like a heavy load  
Or does it explode? (Hughes, 2020, p. 45)

As we ponder on these questions in a new context, we are back in the delivery room in the quest for liberation. Dear Joachim Kügler, the struggle continues. Dreaming continues. We wish to share our stories from the Southern African region with you as the work of dreaming anew in the encounter with persistent oppression. We will share the response of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, commonly known as the Circle. The Circle is a continent-wide academic association, whose aim is to study religion, its impact on women as well as to work for transformation within the academic space and among faith-based communities,

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<sup>1</sup> We regard the encounter with neo-colonialism and liberal economy as the second struggle, post-independence. These categorizations do not suggest separate and disconnected stages, for they are all intertwined.

particularly for the empowerment of women and girls. The Circle is a dream movement. It dreams and labours for the dream of liberation. It groans in the labor pains for the liberation of African women, lands, and people. I (Dube) am currently the Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and I (Kenosi) I am an active participant in the journey, agenda, and dreams of the Circle. Above all, the Circle is a dream space and dream work in the context of persistent oppression. Calling on African women to stubbornly embody the dream of liberation, its founder (Mercy Oduyoye) says:

Dream, Girl Dream!  
 What is the future going to be?  
 Dream, Girl Dream  
 What we may become—that’s what matters  
 Dream woman, dream...  
 Woman, dream Africa’s dream  
 Be a woman and Africa will be strong (Oduyoye, 1988, p. 35)

The new context of the dream calls for deferred dreams to explode into new energy in quest to work out salvation. Salvation is liberation from all forms of oppression. This new context of is characterized by climate change, HIV and AIDS, COVID-19, GBV, neo-liberal economy, and escalating economic inequalities. These pandemics congregated in the Southern African region, complicating our quest to attain the human dignity and rights for all our members. The Mozambican Frelimo liberation war slogan, “*a luta continua*,” the struggle continues, is thus in order, for three decades since South Africa gained independence, the struggle for equality is yet to be realized. Mother Earth is still facing degradation due to human’s greediness and rapaciousness.

## 2.1 Climate Change, Global, Regional and Gendered Impacts

In today’s context of climate change and global warming, the imperative to centre Mother Earth is evident for and to all of us. It needs no special pleading and persuasion. We are all witnesses, wherever we are based, to the major changes that are happening to our beloved Mother Earth. Mother Earth tears and weeps under persistent, longer, and stronger cy-

clones, hurricanes, droughts, tornadoes, wildfires, and hailstorms. Glaciers break, melt and float. At the time of writing this chapter, an intense heat wave in the range of 35–43° C (95–109 °F) swept across most of Southern African countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Mozambique and Namibia. It burnt crops and dried water for animals. Climate change is a hard reality in the Southern African region. Accordingly, the IPCC Sixth Report published in February 2022 notes, “Human-induced climate change, including more frequent and extreme events have caused adverse impacts and related losses and damage to nature and people” (IPCC, 2022, p. 9). The report points out that

“Widespread impacts to ecosystems, people, settlements, and infrastructure have resulted in observed increases in the frequency and intensity of climate and weather extremes, including hot extremes on land and in the ocean, heavy precipitation events, droughts, and fire weathers... Adverse impacts from tropical cyclones, with related losses and damages have increased due to the sea level rise and the increase in heavy precipitation.” (IPCC, 2022, p. 8).

In their paper, “Climate Impacts in Southern Africa During the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Robert Scholes and Francois Engelbrecht, point out that

“Southern Africa is particularly vulnerable to climate change, because of its geographical location and socio-economic development state. It is already warm and dry region projected to become warmer and drier; and has many demands on its institutions’ finances in addition to climate change. Warming in the interior of Southern Africa is occurring at about twice the global rate.” (Scholes & Engelbrecht, 2021, p. 2).

Scholes and Francois proceed to enumerate the various impacts and risks that will or accompanies this situation (Scholes & Engelbrecht, 2021, p. 2). They point out that agricultural production such as staple crops and livestock will be reduced; freshwater availability, which was already limited in Southern Africa, will be further reduced due to “decreasing rainfall & increasing evaporation; droughts can be expected to take longer duration; the number and intensity and duration of heat waves will increase (Scholes & Engelbrecht, 2021, p. 2). There is also risk of severe storms that will destroy some of the vegetation in the region. Thus, the tropical cyclones will become more frequent and more intense in the region due to

climate change. Furthermore, thousands of species are expected to become extinct, due to the destruction of their habitats (Molato, 2020, p. 31). This is evident in the Okavango Delta that due to human encroachment in the heart of the Delta some of the animals were forced to seek refuge in different places thus causing human and animal conflicts in the region (Molato, 2020, p. 31). Consequently, both the human and environmental rights are severely compromised by this state of climate change in Southern Africa.

Climate change, which was first perceived by some as a myth, is now a glaring reality in the Southern Africa. Our home country, Botswana, is a semi desert that always had fragile rains. The scarcity of the rain in Botswana significantly impacts its citizens. Chants for rainfall in public gathering and in ceremonies are part of the cultural fabric of Botswana (Molato, 2020, p. 53). When we were growing up, we knew the rainy season started in October and that we could expect drought almost once in a decade. However, today the seasons have shifted dramatically. Droughts have become more frequent, if not permanent, and heat waves have become unbearable. Our rains now begin around December and their unreliability is the only constant factor. During the days when we were growing up, all farms were ploughed during the rainy season because people were sure of their harvest. But now it is too risky and too expensive to plough and then watch one's crops burn and die due to insufficient rains and intensified heat waves. Most fields, therefore, lie fallow, and most people are forced to be dependent on the grocery stores, that is, if one is working and has a constant salary. These droughts are now more frequent in Southern Africa, particularly in Namibia, Botswana, Angola, and Madagascar, making food insecurity a real and constant threat.

Countries with coastal cities such as Madagascar, Comoros, Mozambique, and South Africa, have borne the brunt of frequent and more intensified storms. One thinks here of the 2019 Cyclone Idai, which did not only hit Mozambique, but flattened and drowned trees, animals, fields, cities, villages, schools, roads, bridges, and mountains through Zimbabwe up to Malawi. Cyclone Idai was described as the worst tropical cyclone on record to affect Africa and the Southern hemisphere. Within the period of five years (2019–2024), Madagascar, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi Madagascar endured Cyclone Idai (2019) and Freddy (2023). The impacts

of these extreme weather events on livelihoods are huge. Many therefore find themselves homeless, unable to produce their own food, facing sanitation and disease threats. Many girl-children drop out of school due to lack of resources, many are forced to migrate to cities in search for jobs in order to provide for their families. This also leads to high crime-rates and gender-based violence escalates, among other ills. According to The IPPC Technical Working and SADC Vulnerability Assessment Committee report of 2022, there are about “33 million people facing high levels of food insecurity in the region” (IPCC Sixth Report, 2022) of Southern Africa at the moment. They are primarily located in DRC, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Zambia.

## 2.2 Women and Climate Change

Dear Joachim Kügler, there is no doubt that all humanity and all continents are affected by climate change in major way. Yet African women and other marginalized people are disproportionately impacted by climate change. According to data from the UN Women website: “It is the world’s poorest and those in vulnerable situations, especially woman and girls, who bear the brunt of environmental, economic and social shocks.” (UN Women, 2017) In short, it is women who are responsible for feeding their families, and fetching water, who bear the burden of increased work as they must travel far to fetch water and work much harder to feed their families. Women watch their crops dry up and die before harvest. Young girls in such situations face higher chances of dropping out school, as teenage pregnancy and child marriages escalate, sometimes because impoverished families seek to rid themselves of what they experience as the burden of feeding and educating them. With economic insecurities facing communities, statistical attestation indicates that the rates of gender-based violence and human trafficking rise. Linking climate change and gender, Circle’s Ghanaian scholars Sylvia Owusu-Ansah and Beatrice-Joy Owusu-Ansah argue that it is women who bear a greater brunt when the Earth is subjugated and suffers from degradation (Owusu-Ansah & Owusu-Ansah, 2021, p. 55). Consequently, at the core of climate change is the issue of women who are greatly affected more than men.

Underlining that “*climate change is women’s issue*,” in March 2022, UN CSW66 chose a priority theme on “Achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction and programs.” They

“expressed concern that climate change, the pollution of the air, land and water; biodiversity loss and the decline in ecosystems functions and services threaten the full enjoyment of human rights of all women and girls and have acute impacts on women and girls, especially on rural, indigenous and migrant women and girls.” (UN CSW66, 2022, Point 18).

The commission further “recognized that the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental challenges increase and exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to discrimination and all forms of violence” (UN CSW66, 2022, Point 39). In its conclusion, the commission calls upon various sectors, including Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) to implement the plan of action. Since most of FBOs are patronized by women, they are encouraged to be in solidarity with women’s struggles for justice. The persistence of subjugation of African women led to the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to drive the dream for the liberation both in the continent and the diaspora.

### **3. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians’ Response**

#### **3.1 What is the Circle?**

Joachim Kügler, in this section we want to share with you the journey of African women theologians and their response to pandemics and climate change in Africa. Let us start by elaborating on the formation of the Circle. The Ghanaian scholar Mercy Amba Oduyoye founded the Circle in 1989 (Phiri, 2009, pp. 105–119). As a native Ghanaian woman, Mercy Oduyoye observed that while women patronized and participated in most religious and spiritual practices and movements, they were hardly leaders in these settings. Thus, their faith was mostly used against them (Egbeyle, 2018). Religion tended to be used to legitimate the oppression of women and to encourage women to accept their culturally prescribed status as second

citizens. She also noticed that African women were absent in most academic departments in Africa. Challenged by this observance, in 1989, Oduyoye gathered 69 women from all over the continent, from every religion, from both the academy and faith institutions and launched what became known as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Kanyoro, 2006, pp. 19–23).

The mandate of the Circle, therefore, is to undertake research on all Africa-based religions and cultures; to analyze how they characterize and construct gender; to re-imagine ways of interpreting religion/cultures in ways that empower both men and women; to mentor young women and to train women who will become scholars and leaders in faith communities (Njoroge, 2002, pp. 41–57). At the core of the vision of the Circle is the desire to transform oppressive, exploitative social structures that marginalize people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability. Its approach seeks to create a space that welcomes women, girls, and other marginalized people as equal citizens. The membership of the Circle is currently around a thousand. The Circle includes both women and men in the academic and FBOs institutions who see the need to transform the society which oppress women. Mercy Oduyoye, the founder of the Circle, called for a two-winged theology. She asserts that a bird cannot fly with one wing. The struggle for liberation, in other words, demands the energies of all members in the society to come to fruition. The Circle's structure of operation consists of the overall Continental leader assisted by six regional coordinators covering South, East, Central, West, French Speaking and Diaspora regions. Lastly, each country has a country leader, who coordinates Circle activities at a national level. Sometimes there are Circles at institutional levels within each country. The main aim of the Circle is the transformation of the society not just theoretical undertaking. The Circle consists of academicians and the practitioners on the ground. The Circle is a force to be reckoned with in the African societies, academic and faith spaces.

### **3.2 HIV and AIDS Pandemic in the Circle**

Dear Joachim Kügler, you will be glad to know that the Circle has a research structure, guiding its dream for liberation and justice. A common research theme is usually chosen, depending on the most pressing issues

confronting African women and their communities. Different regions, countries and individuals are free to interpret and research the focal theme according to their specific contexts, subject areas, methods, theories and interests. Specific countries and individual are also free to research themes that are outside the chosen theme. From 2002 till 2018, the Circle focused on theme of HIV and AIDS (Dube & Kanyoro, 2004; Dube, 2003; Dube, 2008) for it was a global pandemic that had a major impact on the continent of Africa, and for the Southern Africa region and women in particular. The HIV and AIDS pandemic raised many human rights issues and necessitated a human rights approach. Through its death-dealing forces and long suffering; through its stigma and discrimination; and through its tendency to raise GBV, a human rights framework became necessary to responding to HIV and AIDS. Stigma and discrimination, for example, did not only marginalize PLHWA from work and living spaces and from free social interaction, but it also often led to limited or hindered access to quality care; access to essential services and resources, and sometimes such hindrance leads to avoidable deaths among PLWHA. Realizing that HIV and AIDS placed African people, and women in particular, at the centre of the storm, in all its key areas of concerns—that is stigma and discrimination, prevention, caregiving, counselling and testing, access to medication, gender-based violence – the Circle decided to focus its research on the pandemic. It sought to investigate what and how each religion, culture, philosophy or ethics could say about the burning issues of HIV and AIDS. In the area of stigma discrimination, for example, a research project could investigate how a particular religion/culture constructs or justifies marginalization; how it is gendered and how it might be re-interpreted constructively to promote compassion and inclusiveness. Some research projects investigated how health and disease are constructed in religions/cultures, while seeking to identify and analyze user-friendliness perspectives or their capacity to further distance PLWHA from accessing care and enjoying their human dignity. In all cases, whether the project was approached from theology, ethics, religion, liturgy, philosophy, sociology, Bible, Quran, the Circle mainstreamed gender. Whenever the framework of human rights perspective was needed, the Circle interrogated and highlighted religious perspectives that supports the same. For example, arguing that all people are created in God's

image, a case is made that no person regardless of race, gender, sexuality, class, age, or health should be denied their human dignity. From the New Testament perspective, Jesus' radical self-identification with the Other, was one such perspective to consider. Matthew 25, for example, features Jesus saying, "you saw me naked; I was in prison, I was hungry, homeless, thirsty and you did not attend to me." It follows that in the HIV and AIDS context Jesus would certainly say, "I am HIV positive". A Christology of radical solidarity with the marginalized, therefore, calls for the dismantling of stigma and discrimination and protection of human rights for all. Similarly, an ecclesiological framework that constructs the church as one body with many parts, holding that "when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer," challenges churches to become welcoming and compassionate spaces. Using African Indigenous Religions' perspectives also offered many user-friendly frames of thinking and acting. The Ubuntu philosophy that urges us to express our humanity through the capacity to welcome, receive and empower the Other, instead of discriminating against them encourages building and sustaining welcoming and inclusive communities. The Circle also collaborated with various NGOs, FBOs, Developmental organizations and ecumenical movements, through providing training and producing relevant materials for mainstreaming HIV and AIDS (Dube, 2015b, 531–542). *Africa Praying: A Guide to HIV and AIDS Sensitive Sermons* (Dube 2003) is good example of a resource produced for equipping the church for a constructive response.

HIV and AIDS remains a challenge. Statistically and historically,

"Eastern and Southern African is the region carrying the largest share in the global burden of the HIV and the epicenter of HIV epidemic. Much progress has been made but the gains are fragile, and HIV continues to have tremendous impact on the lives of children and adolescents, especially girls and their families." (Schermbucker, 2016).

Accordingly, the UNAIDS 2020 Fact Sheet of 2020 also indicates that East and Southern regions are still on top of the world in the number of people living with HIV and AIDS: 20–23 million PLWHA in the world are currently in this region, between 700–900 thousand were newly infected in the year 2021, while 16.2 million currently on treatment. For quite a long time the countries with the highest infection and the highest numbers of

people living with HIV were both located in the region of Southern African. To their credit, some countries in Southern Africa have reached the 2030, 95–95–95 targets much early. Both Botswana and Zimbabwe reached this target by the year 2022 (UN 2020).

### 3.3 Climate Change: Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and Religious Imagination

In 2019, the Circle began to switch its research focus from the HIV and AIDS pandemic to the Earth and Gender crisis in African societies. Well, as you may remember, dear Joachim Kügler, that a new research area was launched in Gaborone Botswana under the conference theme of “Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and Religious Imagination.” You attended that Conference Joachim! Ja! One hundred and forty participants from all over the continent and the African diaspora attended this conference. The proceedings resulted in eight published books. Some of the books include: *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Biblical studies* (Berman et al., 2021); *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology* (Chisale & Bosch, 2021); *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions* (Penxa-Matholeni, Boateng & Manyonganise, 2020); *Mother Earth, Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies* (Chirongoma & Mombo, 2021); *African Literature, Mother Earth and Religion* (Gudhlanga, Muganiwa & Dube, 2020); and *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Mission* (Daniel & Kebaneilwe, 2021) and many more.

The Circle chose the framework of Mother Earth to interrogate how the oppression of the Earth and women, intersect with coloniality, neo-liberalism, gender, class, race, ethnicity, age and religion. Mother Earth framework was chosen to be in solidarity with the Earth in her role of birthing and nurturing life, a role that women share with Mother Earth. Although some western feminists have problematized the framework of ‘Mother Earth’ as potentially oppressive, Mercy Oduyoye argues that the ethics of motherhood are compelling and much needed by our world (Oduyoye, 2002, pp. 57–64). She maintains that mothers’ work is driven by the ethic of caring for the Other and working to see the Other become a person; and that our capitalistic and neo-liberal economic systems can learn a lot from the ethics of motherhood. Mother economics, modelled best by both women and Mother Earth, are thus in order.

In our journey of solidarity with Mother Earth, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians endeavours to be partners with the Earth against exploitative and oppressive economic systems that regard the Earth as an object for endless exploitation. African women recognize the sources and structures of exploitation that oppress Africa to be the same oppressors of Mother Earth. Our theological quest therefore needs to ask: Does water have the right to be clean and unpolluted? Does the air and the atmosphere have the right to be clean and unpolluted? Does the soil have the right to be clean and unpolluted? Do trees, plants, and animals have the right to live and thrive, without being subjugated to human exploitation for their humanity's own ends? Entering the discourse for the rights of nature from a religion point of view, we interrogate what our cultures and scriptures offer. In this we mean various cultures/religions African Indigenous Religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Rastafarianism, among others. We interrogate our sources for positive, negative and potential user-friendly perspectives. We ask ourselves about ways of reading and interpretation that sway us away from anthropocentric worldviews to perspectives that assist us to think of the Earth-community as interconnected and interdependent, without placing human beings above other members of creation. For example, instead of reading Genesis 1 from the perspective that say human beings were given dominion over the all members of creation, we choose to underlie that every member was created by the word of God; every member was pronounced good; and the whole creation was found to be very Good and that God's will is, above all, to see all members of the Earth remain in their goodness, in their interconnectedness and their sacredness (Dube, 2015a, pp. 1–17). The Circle seeks to interrogate what should constitute preaching the gospel in the context of global warming and climate change. African women and their communities have contributed less to global warming, but they are disproportionately impacted by climate change. It is imperative to seek for those perspectives that define the gospel as a gospel to nature, the whole creation, and the oppressed (Luke 4:16–22).

From African Indigenous Religions, we also interrogate our sources for their understanding of creation and relationships to nature. What, for example, is the function of animal totems? From an ecological perspective and African traditional religion (AIRS), totemism promotes a worldview

of self-identification with animals and animal world. It cultivates consciousness of interconnectedness with nature than encouraging dualism and hierarchy. It constructs inclusive perspectives of community.

For example, I (Dube) am a Dube, which means Zebra! I, and all the other Dube communities, hold the Zebra with reverence. We will not kill, eat, or use any of its products, for it is a member of our families and community (Dube et al., 2016).

I (Molato) am an elephant. This suggests that the ethnic group which I belong see themselves as one with elephant. In this regard, the Bayei ethnic group does not kill or eat an elephant (Molato & Dube, 2019, p. 220).

Most Southern African communities subscribe to animal totemism that constructs human beings as related to animal world (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991, p. 190). The Circle research on Earth equally interrogates perspectives towards plants, water, rain, land, and the rituals that go with it. At the same time, Mother Earth and Mother Africa frameworks explore African women's relationship with and knowledge of nature. It also investigates how patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and neo-liberal economies that oppress and exploit women also oppress Mother Earth. In sum, the current research focus seeks for ways of reading and re-reading of cultures and religions for creation justice and liberating interdependence.

Since the launch of the research theme on "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Religious Imagination," eight volumes from biblical, theological, world religions, AIRS, mission etc. perspectives have been published.<sup>2</sup> Since 2019 the Circle has continued with the Earth-focused theme. The Circle seeks to work with faith communities, for the healing of Mother Earth and all its members in the context of global warming and climate change.

### **3.4 The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Circle Response**

Dear Joachim Kügler, as you know, in 2020 there was the COVID-19 outbreak. It took the world by surprise, unleashing massive death and devastating impact. When it first appeared, most people did not think it would spread so quickly around the globe. The region of Southern Africa was plagued by a significant share of COVID-19, including variants that had

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the works published are listed in the reference sessions.

us banned from travelling to certain countries at the time. African women found themselves locked down, denied the right to move freely and to carry their normal business activities as governments sought to control and contain the pandemic. African women found themselves masked and behind closed doors (Amenga-Etego et al., 2021). With schools closed, teenage pregnancy and child marriages went up. Moreover, lockdowns multiplied poverty among most African women employed in the informal sector (Hadebe, 2021). Gender-based violence soared by 20%, worldwide. As a research organ, focusing on issues impacting women, the Circle published two books, which interrogated how religion, gender, and COVID-19 impacted African women during the lock down (Hadebe, 2021; Amenga-Etego, 2021).

Be that as it may, Mother Earth received a sabbatical from human pollution during the COVID-19 lockdown. Skies became clearer and brighter; birds began to sing sweet songs in quietness (Maluleke, 2022). In some cases, animals began to repossess the abandoned city-centres. COVID-19 delivered a break to Mother Earth; a break from human-driven ecological degradation and pollution. The COVID 19-forced sabbatical refocused nature and the identity of the members of the Earth community. It demonstrated that human beings had colonized many spaces, which belong to other species, hence the hyenas and wolfs began to reclaim their memories and to re-enter the cities that belonged to them.

The struggle against various pandemics and climate change in the Southern African region continues. As we noted earlier, African women and societies are disproportionately impacted by climate change and their struggles to adapt and become resilient. Like Thabo Mbeki at the birth of a nation, the Circle is full of hope as it recites Mercy Amba Oduyoye's poem:

Dream, Girl Dream!  
 What is the future going to be?  
 Dream, Girl Dream  
 What we may become—that's what matters  
 Dream woman, dream...  
 Woman, dream Africa's dream  
 Be a woman and Africa will be strong (Oduyoye, 1988, p. 35)

## 4. Concluding Remarks

Dear Joachim Kügler, this chapter began by inviting you to the Southern African journeys of the struggle for liberation. It began with the classic poem of hope recited by the former South African President Thabo Mbeki. At the birth of a new nation, Mbeki envisions a country which is free from the shackles of Apartheid and ecological oppression. His opening underscores a very high ecological consciousness, for Mbeki asserts: “I owe my being to the hills and valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers and the deserts, the trees and flowers” (Mbeki 1996). He presents himself as having equal citizenship with “the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the Springbok, the hyena, the black Mamba, and the pestilential mosquito” (Mbeki 1996), thus underlining the interconnectedness between the African people, their land and all other forms of life. As Mbeki notes, “My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter-day snows. It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine and melted in the heat of the mid-day sun” (Mbeki 1996). Yet as the chapter highlights, the dream for liberation was hijacked by the rise of persistent structures of oppression such as neo-colonialism, climate change, the liberal economy, pandemics, and conflicts.

The Circle of African Concerned African Women Theologians emerged within the historical context of postcolonial disappointments and the quest to guard the beautiful dream of liberation for and with all. Circle members were invited to the work of dreaming the dream of liberation and justice. The women of the Circle were invited to counteract hijacked dreams of the liberation and justice to Mother Earth and her children. As we have highlighted, the Circle’s areas of interrogation and quest for transformation are patriarchy, colonialism/neo-colonialism, pandemics, climate change and Earth health. Given the impact of HIV&AIDS on African societies, and, on women in particular, the Circle could not be indifferent. It engaged with the monstrous pandemic through research, writing, publications and by equipping faith communities for a constructive response. Second, the chapter highlighted the Circle’s response to climate change, a context that impacts the whole Earth community. Yet African women are more affected than men due to their gender roles and economic status. Since the struggle for justice in various fronts continues,

the agenda and the engagement of the Circle will continue to “dream Africa’s dream” (Oduyoye, 1988, 35). The social wellbeing of African societies remains central to the agenda of African women. It is on these bases that the Circle continues to engage with global, regional, national, and local issues through research, writing, publishing, and community engagement. In this journey, Professor Joachim Kügler, you have been a beloved comrade in the struggle.<sup>3</sup> We celebrate your friendship, your solidarity, and your socially engaged scholarship.

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3 Some recent examples include Berman, Dunbar, Dube & Kgalemang, 2021; Amenyedzi, Maton & Yele, 2023; Maseno, Najagu & Kavou, 2024; Mwale, Gabaitse, Kobo & Tembo, 2024; Etego, Stiebert & Aidoo, 2021.

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