

## CHAPTER 18

# Feminist Theologies in Africa

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### Introduction

In 1997, while I was an Honours student in Hebrew Bible my teacher of Hebrew, at the University of Cape Town, Azila Reisenberger, invited me to a meeting at the home of Denise Ackermann. She told me that the group I was going to meet was called the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and that the “Cape Town Circle” was one chapter of a number of chapters or groups of this growing women’s movement on the continent of Africa. “What do they do?” I asked with curiosity “They do feminist theology from the perspectives of African women,” she answered. “And how do they do this?” was my next question. “They do theology by beginning with their context and stories,” she answered and then urged me to attend the group meeting that night with the words “We are just telling our stories at the moment.”

And so began my journey with feminist theologies in Africa—with this little group of women from different faiths—Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, African traditionalists, and Christian, all focusing on what it meant to reflect on our context, identity and spirituality as feminist theologians. These reflections were ultimately published in a book called *Claiming Our Footprints: South African women reflect on context, identity and spirituality*, a book in which my attempt at writing my first article was published (see Nadar, 2000). It became clear to me that through this small group of women, who identified themselves with a continental-wide movement, feminist theology was being done in Africa. Hence, any attempt to consider the history and the development of feminist theologies in Africa must of necessity look to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle) as a chief source of information and guidance on this oft-contested subject.

In this survey article on feminist theologies in Africa, I wish to reflect on three areas within this topic: 1) the history and development of feminist theologies in Africa; 2) the methods and features of African feminist theologies<sup>1</sup>; and 3) the problems of and

possibilities for the future of feminist theologies in Africa. Before beginning, it is important to note two things. Firstly, while feminist theologies are by no means restricted to the religion of Christianity in Africa, I wish to restrict my discussion in this chapter to the development within Christianity, given that this is where my expertise and training lies. Secondly, while I situate these reflections within the body of work which has already attempted to document the contours of African women's theologies (Phiri, 1997; Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2006; Landman, 1995), I will also attempt here to raise some critiques of the discourse and note some potential areas for future development.

### The History and Development of Feminist Theologies in Africa

If one wants to know the history of feminist theologies in Africa one must look to the history of the Circle, which is well documented in recent writings (see for example Kanyoro, 2006). It deserves some attention here, in at least three areas of the history and development of feminist theologies in Africa: 1) its relationship to the history of the global feminist movement; 2) the necessity of formulating African women's theologies vis-à-vis African theology and its sub-disciplines; and 3) the distinctive face of African women's theologies vis-à-vis their feminist counterparts in other parts of the world.

#### *Feminist Theologies in Africa and their Relationship to the Global Feminist Movement*

The rise of the feminist movement has usually been described as having occurred in "three waves." The first wave focused on women's political rights—the suffrage movement of the early 1920s in the US, and its counterpart movements in other parts of the world—for example in the early 1930s when white women first obtained the right to vote in South Africa. The second wave focused more on women's civil rights in the domestic sphere, for example on issues of reproductive rights and household duties. The third wave is now commonly understood as the strand within feminism that recognizes that women are by no means a homogenous group and therefore any attempt at describing women's experiences (women's collective experiences being the chief cornerstone of feminist discourse) must essentially and inevitably consider that women's experiences are indeed varied and different and hence the slogan that "we are not all sisters under the skin" must be taken seriously. It is within this third wave of feminist discourse that African women's theologies find their expression most perceptibly. In other words, African women theologians have strived to carve a space for themselves which is both welcoming of, and takes seriously, their experiences from within varied African contexts—these experiences include among others, experiences of colonialism and apartheid (Dube, 2000), patriarchal oppression within culture (Kanyoro, 2002) the rise of the HIV pandemic particularly within the context of gender oppression (Phiri et al., 2003; Dube and Kanyoro, 2004) and the ever-increasing feminization of poverty (Haddad, 2000).

*African Women's Theologies vis-à-vis African Theologies*

In addition to the space which African women's theologies have carved for themselves within the global secular feminist movement, African women theologians have also sought to chart a separate space for themselves within the "irruption" (cf. Fabella and Torres, 1983) of varied liberation theologies into the classical western academy. One such liberation theology is what is now commonly known as African theologies, and these theologies are not only taught at theological institutions in Africa, but also the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for example, even boasts a chair in African Theologies.<sup>2</sup> African Theologies, which began as a protest theology against the demonizing tendencies of colonial and missionary interpretations of the religion and culture in Africa, has evolved into an authentic discipline and several scholars research and publish in the area of the intersection of African religion and cultures and Christianity. Scholars such as Setiloane (1980), Pobee (1978), Tutu (1979), and Mbiti (1979) were some of the first scholars to seriously engage and name this emerging theology in the 70s and 80s.

African Theologies further broke down into several theological sub-disciplines. Tinyiko Maluleke (1997:4–23) has argued that while the debates were on one level, between African theology and the classical theology of the west, there was also an "internal" debate going on too—this debate was about the differences between Black or Liberation Theologies and African Theologies—the proponents of the latter arguing that the cultures and experiences of the African people were not taken seriously by the former discourses. Hence, while they were keen to show the similarities between the discourses, they were also insistent on the differences. These debates were well captured in some of the titles of the papers and books which emerged, e.g. Josiah Young's 1986 work *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins?*, Desmond Tutu's 1986 article *Black Theology and African Theology: Soulmates or Antagonists?* And Mokgethi Motlhabi's article *Black or African Theology? Toward an Integral African Theology*.

While the proponents of African Theologies may have felt appropriated rather than included by Liberation or Black Theologies, another group emerged, who also felt appropriated by African Theology itself. This group is made up of African women theologians who have argued in different contexts that while it was noble that African Theology was protesting the non-inclusion of African culture in both classical and liberation discourses, African Theology nonetheless portrayed the African *male* experience of culture as the norm. In this respect African women felt that their voices were not only excluded from this theologizing, but that their experiences of culture as negative forces within their lives were particularly being ignored. It is for this reason that the visionary Mercy Amba Oduyoye and others like her decided that if African women's engagement with theology and culture were going to be taken seriously, then African women would have to construct this theology themselves (Oduyoye, 1995). As Brigalia Bam could assert: "If ever there was going to be a Theology of Liberation for women, women had to construct it. It would not come automatically even from the most radical of our theologies" (Bam, 2005:10). And so African women's theologies of liberation, while finding continuity with African theologies, also pushed the boundaries and extended the discourses beyond the confines of male experiences as normative. Maluleke argued that African women's theologies were charting a new way and accurately

predicted that in the twenty-first century African women's theologies would be a force to be reckoned with:

Whereas Black and African theologies have for the past half-century argued for the validity of African Christianities and the legitimacy of African culture, African Feminist/Womanist theology is charting a new way. This theology is mounting a critique of both African culture and African Christianity in ways that previous African theologies have not been able to do. From these theologies, we may learn how to be truly African and yet be critical of aspects of African culture. African womanist theologians are teaching us how to criticise African culture without denigrating it, showing us that the one does not and should not necessarily lead to the other. My prediction is that the twenty-first century is going to produce an even more gendered African theology. All theologians and African churches will be well advised to begin to take heed (Maluleke, 1997:21–22).

#### *African Women's Theologies vis-à-vis Feminist Theologies*

In the same way that African women's theologies found both continuity with, and was critical of, African Theology, they shared a similar view of feminist theologies of the west. While I have used the terms "African women's theologies" and "feminist theologies in Africa" interchangeably thus far in this article, it must be noted that many African women theologians have problems identifying themselves as feminist. The challenges which they find with this term have been well documented in the article called *What's in a Name? Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies*, written by Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar. The main difference between African women's theologies and feminist theologies, I would argue, lies in the emphasis each wishes to place on particular issues, rather than on an inherent difference in ideologies. In other words, each of the theologies, i.e. both western feminist and African feminist, are cut from the same cloth as it were, and the same adage that has been used by Alice Walker to describe the relationship between womanism and feminism can be used to describe African feminist theologies and western feminist theologies too—i.e. womanist is to feminist as the color purple is to the color lavender (Walker, 1983:xii). It is the emphasis of each theology which defines the contours; the defining focus of feminist theologies in Africa has been on culture. This focus on culture has not been in opposition to issues of gender, race, and class, but in addition or as complementary to these important factors. It is important, therefore, not to draw false dichotomies between feminist theologies in Africa and feminist theologies in the Global North, this false dichotomy usually being understood in terms of African feminist theologies being "softer" and more "conservative." The innovative and bold methods which African women have developed within theology and biblical hermeneutics bears testimony to this.

#### **Methods and Features of Feminist Theologies in Africa**

For over two decades women theologians in Africa have been developing and sharpening their theological methods in order to both speak to the academy from which many

of their theologies derive, and to also address their communities which inspire such theological reflections and analyses. These methods are characterised by five features—what I refer to in my teaching as “the 5 S’s of feminist theology in Africa,” namely Suspicion; Subjectivity; Story; Scrutiny and the “So-What?” question. Examples of African women’s theologies which illustrate a commitment to each of these characteristic features will be described and analysed in what follows.

*Suspicion—Christian Tradition and Theology is both Patriarchal and Imperial*

As already asserted, feminist theologies in Africa have maintained a critical solidarity with liberation theologies in general, which are suspicious of the imperial and patriarchal nature of Christian tradition and traditional forms of theologizing. These traditional or classical forms of theologizing have more often than not claimed to be universal and “objective.” Furthermore they have served to entrench western worldviews as normative. It is for this reason that African feminist theologians have sought indigenous forms of knowledge on which to base their theologies of liberation. The work of Rose Abbey (2001:140–59), the Ghanaian feminist theologian, is a good example of the search for the feminist within local theologies. She finds and reclaims the indigenous names used for God within the Akan culture and shows how names that were traditionally feminine were translated as masculine within Christian western forms of theologizing. Her work has been significant in exposing the imperial and patriarchal tendencies of classical theologies. Her groundbreaking study proposes a systematic doctrine of God within the framework of both an African and feminist understanding; an approach that parallels feminist theologians in the west such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983:47–71) who have sought to find, reclaim and reassert the feminine nature of the deities both as it is expressed in scripture and in traditional forms of religion. Rose Abbey’s theological method and insights therefore advance traditional systematic doctrine and traditional feminist doctrine, which are often steeped within western worldviews.

*Subjectivity—The Specificity of Experience*

While liberation theologies in general and feminist theologies in particular have stressed that experience is a legitimate starting point of theologizing, often liberation theologies have tended to use experience as a codeword for poor or black and have therefore tended to generalize on the experiences of third world subjects. Feminist theologies in Africa and the two-thirds world in general have been wary of this generalizing and often colonizing tendency to, as Mohanty (1988:63) declares, portray all third world women as oppressed or paint all African women with the same brush. African feminist theologies have sought to specify their localities and hence their theological methods based on their specific locations. This has resulted in culturally specific theological and hermeneutical methods such as *Bosadi* (Masenya, 1996, 1997), *Imbokodo* (Nzimande, 2008) and *Semoya* (Dube 1996). They have also not been afraid to engage their own contexts

in critical and affirming ways (see the work of Landman (1994) on Afrikaans women in South Africa for example). African women theologians have therefore not presumed that African culture is homogenous, and "unlike European imperial historians, explorers, and missionaries of the previous centuries, African [women] theologians have generally been wary of generalisations about 'Africa' and African culture" (Maluleke, 1997: 10). Maluleke further uses Mercy Oduyoye's now classical book, *Daughters of Anowa* (1995), to show how serious attempts have been made to ensure that the terms "African culture" and "ATRs" have not been allowed to degenerate into meaningless generalizations and clichés" (Maluleke, 1997:10-11).

### *Story—Narrative Theology is African Women's Theology*

Well before the term narrative theology (cf. Hauerwas and Jones, 1989) became popular in the academy, African schools of thought and philosophy embraced and celebrated the power of stories. African feminist theologies have been no different. The work of feminist theologians in Africa bears testimony to this respect for story as a legitimate method and source of theology, and therefore African women's theologies has aptly been named "narrative theologies" (Landman, 1996:100). Hence there are numerous examples of research and publications in the area of narrative theology. One of the most celebrated Circle books to be published features the story of the daughter of Anowa (Oduyoye, 1995). In her book, Oduyoye tells the story of "Anowa" a mythical woman belonging to various cultural traditions as a priest and a prophet. She uses Anowa's story to create space to talk about African women and their participation in religion because she asserts that "she was the epitome of a woman participating fully in what is life-sustaining and life-protecting, someone worthy of being named an ancestress" (Oduyoye, 1995:7).

Further African women theologians have employed storytelling in their biblical hermeneutics. The collection of essays in the book *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* edited by Musa Dube in 2001 bears testimony to this. In fact the first section of the book is devoted to "Storytelling Methods and Interpretations." In this section, Masenya's article entitled *Esther and Northern-Sotho Stories: An African-South African Woman's Commentary* is a good example of how African women combine the arts of storytelling and biblical interpretation. In the same section, Musa Dube also offers a reading of Mark 5:24-43 and parallels the woman with the hemorrhage to Africa as a bleeding mother trying to save her children from the ravages of colonialism.

Besides using storytelling as a method, African women have also told their own stories of pain and patriarchal oppression as a means to analyze and overcome such oppression (see for example Nadar, 2000; Phiri, 1996, 2000). While telling their stories places them in a position of vulnerability, the stories also become authoritative dialogical texts. As Oduoye (2001:10) has asserted, "African women accept story as a source of theology and so tell their stories as well as study the experiences of other women including those outside their own continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten."

*Scrutiny—Not just the Right Answers but the Right Questions*

While the works of African women theologians to a large extent have focused on a theology of hope as is evidenced with the near obsession with the phrase *Talitha Qumi—Daughter Arise*<sup>3</sup> in the work of African women theologians, this is not to say that African women have not approached their contexts and theologies critically. While the over-use of the biblical phrase *Talitha Qumi* suggests an over-reliance on the Bible as a source of liberation, African feminist scholars have not been afraid to scrutinize the Bible from a critical perspective too. So, while in what can arguably be named *Talitha Qumi* theologies, culture is seen as oppressive and the gospel as liberating, African women have also offered alternatives to the Bible being used as only a source of liberation in African theology (contra Mbiti, 1979:90 who argued that “Any viable theology must and should have a biblical basis”).

In fact, it is not just culture that has been the focus in African women’s theologies but the interconnectedness of issues of race, class, and gender that have also been at the forefront of African women’s theologizing. This interconnectedness is worked out in many of the writings of Musa Dube, who names her methodology “postcolonial feminist hermeneutics.” In a context where the Bible is taken as almost sacrosanct, as is captured by Mbiti’s (1979:90) emphatic statement “Nothing can substitute for the Bible”, Dube’s bold scrutiny of the oppressive nature of the Bible toward women, and the ways in which the Bible is not just patriarchal but imperial, is to be commended. While Dube’s work has taken a critical stance toward issues of race and class in the Bible, other South African women of the Circle have also taken on the issues of race and class in the South African context (Landman, 2002; Masenya, 1995, 2002).

*So What?—The Most Important Question We can Ask Ourselves as Feminists is “So What?”*

The fifth feature of African feminist theologies is its focus on activism. Lillian Robinson has reminded us that “the most important question we can ask ourselves as feminists is ‘so what?’” (quoted in Newton and Rosenfelt, 1985:xv). Newton and Rosenfelt go on to argue that inherent in that question is a view that most of us as feminists share—“that the point of our work is to change the world.” If there is one thing that does distinguish African women theologians from their sisters elsewhere, it is probably this “so what?” question. As with traditional liberation theologies, African women theologians have worked within the “see, judge, act” paradigm. There is a distinct focus of “act” in the work of African women theologians. They are interested in scholarship not for its own sake, but for the ways in which it can change their lives and those of their sisters. It is for this reason that Teresa Okure (1993:77) points out, African women’s “primary consciousness in doing theology is not method, but life and life concerns—their own and those of their own peoples.”

Mercy Oduyoye (2001:16) further maintains that “Women do theology to undergird and nourish a spirituality for life. And so from the affirmations of faith, which they make . . . flows the praxis that gives birth to liberating and life-enhancing visions and further actions and reflections.” It is for this reason that many African women

theologians are engaged in community Bible studies and other forms of engagement (Nadar, 2006; Dube, 1996; Kanyoro, 2001). African feminist theologians therefore do not find it helpful to draw harsh distinctions between activism and academia. These two areas in the life and work of African feminist theologians are not mutually exclusive—they are simply a continuous never-ending spiral of action and reflection.

### Problems With, and Possibilities For, the Future of Feminist Theologies in Africa

Each of the five characteristic features of African women's theologies, and the subsequent creation and development of innovative theological methods examined in the foregoing article, provide us with both challenges to and possibilities for the future of feminist theologies in Africa. How might these challenges be met, and the possibilities be taken up, in an increasing resurgence of conservative religion all over the world?

The first feature of African women's theologies as described above was suspicion—the idea that one needs to be wary of the imperializing and less than life-giving theologies that emanate from the church and elsewhere. I would argue that in the context of a resurgence of conservative religion all over the world, particularly given that most churches in Africa have eschewed traditional forms of worship and spirituality for a more Americanized or European form of “globalized gospel,” a healthy dose of a hermeneutic of suspicion is exactly what is needed, and African feminist theologians would do well to pursue this hermeneutic in their work.

The second feature of feminist theologies in Africa that was presented and analyzed was the notion of subjectivity and specificity in both the description of the contexts and the methods of theologizing that are employed in the work of African feminist theologians. While the use of subjective experiences and specific contexts are important, so that Africa is not presented as homogenous and clichéd, African feminist discourse should also be wary of using indigenous resources uncritically. For example, even the approach of *Bosadi* proposed by Madipoane Masenya has been critiqued as a patriarchal construct (Maluleke, 2001:243).

Thirdly, the focus on personal story and storytelling as a method in African women's theologies is certainly a method that fits in with the more accessible forms of theologizing that African theology in general has become well known for. However, notwithstanding that stories might seem based more “on talent, intuition, or clinical experience [and] defies clear order and systematization” (Lieblich et al., 1998:1), it must be noted that stories must not naively be perceived as comprehensive and precise depictions of truth. In other words, we must recognize that all stories have a bias and an ideology embedded within. As Lieblich et al. have concluded through their study on narrative:

We believe that stories are usually constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these ‘remembered facts’ (1998:8).

And so African women too have to be prepared to have their stories tested and contested, since their ability to convey “truth” is always dependent on the way in which such “truth” is presented—the “remembered facts.”



Fourthly I have shown that another feature of African feminist theologies is its ability to scrutinize existing "truths." A significant source of "truth" in African theology and popular Christianity in Africa still remains the Bible. As Oduyoye (1995:174) has argued: "Throughout Africa, the Bible has been and continues to be absolutized: it is one of the oracles that we consult for instant solutions and responses." In this increasingly globalized Christian context which we find ourselves in—the power of the Bible as authoritative, particularly when it comes to the oppression of women, is now more than ever a concern. It is for this reason that the scrutiny with which African women have started to look at the Bible has to be developed and encouraged. The Bible, like culture, cannot continue to be used uncritically as a source of African theology, when its authoritative effects are less than life-giving for African women.

Finally, I argued that an important feature of African feminist theology has been its focus on praxis—making a difference in the communities from which we come. I think theologians have something to learn from African women in this regard. Denise Ackermann the "mother" of the Circle in Cape Town, the place at which this article began has harsh words for those who do not follow the principles of theological praxis:

So much of our scholarly and intellectual work has little relevance for communities of faith, and it is not surprising that these communities themselves take little interest in it . . . The failure to speak theological words into the moment has been costly . . . We grapple with evil and suffering while we seek hope. In these circumstances the navel-gazing and in-house games of certain bourgeois theologies are irrelevant, even reprehensible (Ackermann, 2003:37).

## Conclusion

If we trace the history of feminist theologies in Africa back to the beginning of the formation of the Circle in 1989, then feminist theologies in Africa have been going strong for two decades. In this article I have attempted to show that their continuity with and distinction from African theology and western feminist theologies have: developed and pushed the boundaries of a hermeneutic of suspicion; have avoided the trap of the "third world difference" and have spoke from their own positions of subjectivity and specific contexts; have broken through the barriers of traditional academic discourses with their own traditions of storytelling; have applied methods of scrutiny to the Bible and theology by not just providing the right answers but asking the right questions; and finally have constantly sought to answer that ever-important question—so what?

## Notes

- 1 I use the terms African women's theologies and African feminist theologies or feminist theologies in Africa interchangeably.
- 2 This program was first coordinated by the immanent African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke, and is currently occupied by the equally immanent theologian, Isabel Phiri.

- 3 See the various Circle books that have been published with this name: Oduyoye, M.A. and Kanyoro, M.R.A. (eds). 1990. *Talitha, Qumil: Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989* (Ibadan: Daystar Press); Oduyoye, M.A. and Kanyoro, M.R.A. (eds). 1992. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books); Njoroge, N. and Dube, M.W. (eds). *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications).