

‘Moving in Circles’ – a *Sankofa–Kairos* theology of inclusivity and accountability rooted in Trinitarian theology as a resource for restoring the liberating legacy of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*

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Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s untitled poem about a circle sets the context for the renewal of the legacy of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (*The Circle*) at a time when *The Circle* seems to be moving in circles of uncertainty lacking a clear unified focus. Oduyoye describes a circle as eternal, expansive, evolving and sustained by self-critique, accountability, inclusiveness and connectedness to the reality around it. This continuous movement is expressed in the concept of *Sankofa–Kairos* which is rooted in the past and radically responsive to the present. This ‘backward–forward’ theological method is critical for *The Circle* to remain true to its mission as a liberating theological and cultural voice for women and other oppressed groups. In contemporary contexts where oppression is pervasive and includes all groups, an inclusive gender paradigm as well as accountability to oppressed groups is critical for the renewal of *The Circle*. Trinitarian theology provides a model for liberating relationships characterised by equality, difference, mutuality, communion and oneness. Thus, it will be argued that Trinitarian theology provides theological resources for *Sankofa–Kairos* theologies for *The Circle* that will be inclusive and accountable to all oppressed groups. This will contribute to the restoration of *The Circle* as a critical contributor to liberation theologies in Africa.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article proposes *Sankofa–Kairos* methodology based on the dual legacies of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* and *The Kairos Document* as the starting point for developing accountable and inclusive liberation theologies rooted in Social Models of the Trinity that could respond to the multiple challenges emerging from the African context.

A Circle expands forever
It covers all who wish to hold hands
And its size depends on each other
It is a vision of solidarity
It turns outwards to interact with the outside
And inward for self-critique
A circle expands forever
It is a vision of accountability
It grows as the other is moved to grow
A circle must have a center
But a single dot does not make a Circle
One tree does not make a forest
A circle, a vision of cooperation, mutuality and care. (Oduyoye 2010:18)

Introduction

The above untitled poem about a circle was written by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founding visionary of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (hereinafter referred to as *The Circle*).¹ In the opening line of the poem, she describes the enduring characteristic of a circle as

1. *The Circle* was founded in 1989 at a meeting of women theologians in Accra, Ghana, led by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and has an estimated membership of 600. Its core work is to research and write on women’s experiences of oppression in culture and religion and produce liberating theologies and also to mentor each other. To date, over 50 books have been published plus numerous articles in journals. There are Pan African meetings held every 5 years where members present their research, set themes for the next 5 years and vote in a new leadership team.

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eternal, that is, 'expands forever'. Thereafter, she outlines a series of intentional practices and values that sustain the eternalness of a circle such as being inclusive 'all who wish to hold hands'; nurturing interdependence; cultivating solidarity; welcoming of the other; engaging in self-critique; commitment to accountability; recognition of being part of the local and global communities and not a self-contained separate entity – 'one tree does not make a forest'; and sustained by a humane ubuntu vision of 'cooperation, mutuality and care'. Inspired by this vision *The Circle* pioneered liberation theologies for women in Africa and most notably in response to HIV and/or AIDS where it provided according to Dube (2009b:203) 'much needed leadership with their HIV-and AIDS-focused research and writing in the academy and community engagement'. However, over the past few years this leadership role seems to have waned, and research output has steadily declined. *The Circle* seems to be 'moving in circles' prompting members to engage in informal conversations on the crisis suggesting among other options, extending its prophetic voice to include all oppressed groups.² In response, this article will propose a critical retrieval of the legacy of *The Circle* in dialogue with contemporary injustices within a theological framework that integrates difference in its analysis and theologies of liberation. A *Sankofa–Kairos* methodology rooted in Trinitarian theology will be presented as fulfilling this criteria.

Sankofa is an Akan (Ghana) term expressed in the sentence *se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki* which means that 'it is not taboo to go back and fetch' because 'whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated'. It is symbolised by a mythical bird that 'flies forward while looking backward with an egg (symbolising the future) in its mouth'. For *The Circle*, *Sankofa* means reflecting on her founding vision and legacy in the light of contemporary multiple forms of oppression experienced by women, LGBTIQ (lesbians, gay, transgender, bisexual, intersex and queer), youth, ethnic minorities, refugees and the poor.

Kairos on the other hand refers to the present as an opportune time to respond to contexts of oppression. *The Kairos Document* of 1985³ was a prophetic theological response to oppression during apartheid in South Africa. Theologies that legitimised apartheid explicitly (state theology) and implicitly (church theology) were confronted as the first step to producing a prophetic theology which empowered Christians to counter the aforementioned theologies and join the struggle for justice. The choice to combine *Sankofa* and *Kairos* as a theological method for *The Circle* is that the former reflects on

2. Last year I was part of informal conversations among some members of *The Circle* through exchange of emails on the crisis and ways of revival in response to the multiple oppressions in contemporary Africa. The discussions gained momentum, culminating in a conference held in Unisa on 5–8th November on the future of *The Circle*.

3. The definition of the Kairos document is taken from the preface, 'The Kairos Document Preface': 'The KAIROS document is a Christian, Biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa today. It is an attempt by concerned Christians in South Africa to reflect on the situation of death in our country. It is a critique of the current theological models that determine the type of activities the Church engages in to try to resolve the problems of the country. It is an attempt to develop, out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model that will in turn lead to forms of activity that will make a real difference to the future of our country' (South African History Online, n.d.c:n.p.)

the past legacy of *The Circle*, while the latter focuses on the multiple oppressions described earlier. The legacy of *The Circle* is a distinctive liberation theology that produced ground-breaking theologies for African women oppressed by both culture and religion. For example, in one of their early books entitled *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women* (Njoroge & Dube 2001) different methods were used to create liberating theologies for women such as ideological readings, narrative analysis, story-telling, autobiographical, documentation of historical and literary cases and fieldwork methods. The first part of the title of the book *Talitha cum* was taken from Mark 5:41 (NRSV) when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead: He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' Dube (2001) applies this metaphor to the liberation of African women as expressed in the following quotation:

The story of the little girl who is called back to life has thus come to symbolize the theological struggles and the quest for empowerment of African women theologians in God's household. [...] Most African women find themselves nameless, without professions, associated with illness in their respective societies and institutions and are living in poverty. (p. 5)

The retrieval of these legacies through *Sankofa–Kairos* methodology provides the framework for *The Circle* to engage and generate liberation theologies with other groups previously excluded. These new relationships require a model of just relationships of mutuality, reciprocity, equality, unity and solidarity that creates trust and accountability between *The Circle* and oppressed groups that are critical for generating liberating theologies that are rooted in the experiences of oppressed groups. Consequently, it will be argued that the relational model found in the relationships within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit provides such a model. According to feminist theologian, LaCugna (1991:184), 'Trinitarian doctrine articulates a vision of God in which there is neither hierarchy nor inequality, only relationships based on love, mutuality, self-giving and self-receiving, freedom and communion'.

In response to the predominant male gendering of the Trinity Johnson (2007:17) subverts this by describing the Trinity as 'literally incomprehensible'. The quality of incomprehensibility is crucial because as Johnson (1992:38) argues, it counters the literalisation of the predominant male names of God used to exclude women from divine representation and justify the violation of women's dignity by subordinating them to men in church and society.

Furthermore, the separation of Trinitarian theology from its source in salvation history contributed to the lack of practical relevance. Rahner (1986:14) explains this status of Trinitarian theology as follows: 'the Trinity occupied an isolated position in the total dogmatic system. It is as though this mystery has been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, as a reality, locked up within itself' and as such was perceived as having no practical relevance. Rahner ignited a revival of Trinitarian theology which opened up a new scholarship concerned with restoring

the practical relevance of Trinitarian theology. This led to the emergence of Social Models of the Trinity (SMT) in the 20th and 21st centuries. Grenz (2001:5) describes the unique features of SMT as consensus across the theological divide and a focus on relationships within the Trinity as expressed in the following quotation:

[...] The stampede to the relationality inherent in the social model of the Trinity has crossed traditional confessional divides. [...] Hence feminist and liberation theologians close ranks with each other and with evangelical, philosophical, and process colleagues in suggesting that God is best viewed as the social Trinity. (p. 5)

The social Trinity is not a new invention but is in continuity with the Trinitarian theology of the Creeds. What distinguishes SMT is the emphasis on the characteristics of relationships within the Trinity which include equality, difference, mutuality, reciprocity, union and communion as definitive of what it means to be human and as the basis of just and equitable human relationships and social structures. Consequently, Trinitarian theology is being proposed as a resource for the development of a *Sankofa-Kairos* liberation theology for *The Circle*.

Accordingly, the following outline will be used to further develop the argument and themes: firstly, *Sankofa* and *The Circle* focusing on the legacy and lessons learnt by *The Circle* particularly in response to HIV and AIDS; secondly, *Kairos* and *The Circle* which will engage in internal critique through the two characteristics of inclusion accountability; thirdly, Trinitarian theology as a resource for liberating, equitable and just relationships and finally concluding remarks which will be a return to Oduyoye's poem.

Sankofa and The Circle

As mentioned in the introduction *Sankofa* is a call to *The Circle* to critically appropriate her legacy as a resource for creating liberation theologies in response to multiple oppressions in contemporary Africa.

The focus of the discussion will be limited to two theological traditions that significantly shaped the theological legacy of *The Circle*, namely Feminist and African theologies, and the application of the legacy in the intervention on behalf of women at the height of the HIV and AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa.

The theological contexts of *The Circle*: Feminist and African theologies

The Circle did not emerge from a theological vacuum but was formed in critical dialogue with existing theologies particularly feminist and African theologies. Feminist theology emerged in the United States and Europe in response to feminist movements for the liberation of women. Like feminism, feminist theology takes as its starting point women's experience of oppression in Christianity. Rosemary Radford Ruether (2002) defines the relationship between feminism and feminist theology as follows:

Feminist theology takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm. They question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males and thus sin by rejecting this subordination. (p. 3)

Feminist theology goes beyond critique and exposing patriarchy to the reconstruction of theology. Ruether elaborates this point as follows:

Feminist theologians also seek to reconstruct the basic theological symbols of God, humanity, male and female, creation, sin and redemption and the church, in order to define these symbols in a gender-inclusive and egalitarian way. In so doing they become theologians, not simply critics of dominant theology. (p. 3)

The Circle responded positively and negatively to feminist theologies. They affirmed women's experiences of oppression in society and religion as the starting point for doing theology – the use of gender analysis to expose patriarchy and sexism in religion and culture and the reconstruction of theological symbols for the liberation of women. For example, Kanyoro (2002:17) defines gender analysis as critical to theologies of *The Circle*: 'Theological engagement with gender issues seeks to expose harm and injustices that are in society and are extended to Scripture and the teachings and practices of the Church through culture'. Similarly, theologies of *The Circle* centralise the experiences of women in their methodology. According to Phiri and Nadar (2006:6), African women theologians must be bilingual 'speaking language of academy and that of their communities not just linguistically, but culturally and socially'.

On the other hand, negative responses to feminist theologies cite the Euro-centrism in feminist theologies that assume that experiences of women in the West are normative for all women irrespective of race, culture and class (2006:1–2). Thus, one of the distinctive characteristics of theologies of *The Circle* is a multidimensional analysis of oppression as explained below by Phiri (2004):

African women's theologies take women's experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexist. (p. 156)

The second context that contributed to the shaping of a distinctive identity of *The Circle* was African theologies. African theologies like other theologies elsewhere were the domain of male theologians. The context for the emergence of African theologies (Martey 1993:xi) was colonialism and certain missionary theologies that denigrated African cultures, as well as apartheid and racism in South Africa. The two streams of African theologies responding to these different contexts were inculturation and black liberation theologies. In response to inculturation theologies, African female theologians questioned the tendency of many African male theologians to consistently portray African

culture in a positive light with regard to its treatment of women while blaming colonialism and its capitalistic systems for women's experiences of oppression. Masenya (2000:69) argues that colonialism and capitalism 'only served to reinforce the patriarchy inherent in the African culture. It is an indisputable fact that African culture, like all other patriarchal cultures, has a low view on women'. Similarly, but with a different emphasis, Musa Dube (1999:216) contends that the 'first things first' approach adopted during the struggle against colonialism and apartheid made liberation a first priority and demanded solidarity within the community that resulted in the foregrounding of gender inequality and oppression in African cultures.

Consequently, culture is central to *The Circle* theologies as reflected in the works of Kanyoro (2002) and Oduyoye (1994) who appropriate cultural hermeneutics as a first step towards an African women's liberation theology. For Kanyoro (2002:15), culture is a double-edged sword which oppresses and liberates women; thus the oppressive elements in culture 'makes it impossible for them to experience the liberating promises of God which bible speaks of'. Similarly, Oduyoye (1994:177) identifies patriarchy in culture as the root cause of oppression and argues that 'the real disease in human relationship is rooted in the perverse patriarchalization of life'.

The next section will continue to discuss the legacy of *The Circle* in relation to the HIV and/or AIDS pandemic, particularly the disproportionate impact on women in sub-Saharan Africa.

***The Circle*, HIV and/or AIDS and women: Lessons learnt**

As mentioned in the introduction one of the legacies of *The Circle* was its pioneering intervention in response to the crisis of HIV and AIDS. In 2002, *The Circle* met for the Pan African Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia under the theme *Sex, Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices*. The goal as described by Hinga et al. (2008:viii) was to 'analyse, discern, debate and reflect on ways in which gender and religion intersect in Africa, and how this intersection ought to shape an African response to HIV / AIDS'. A 4-year theological agenda was set from 2002 to 2006 to 'engage with HIV and AIDS in its research, writing, teaching and community engagement' and to include the stories of people living with HIV (Dube 2009a:174). Five books were produced based on the conference papers. In her assessment of these contributions of *The Circle*, Dube (2009a:174) identified two overarching themes as 'justice and life': '... the perspective of African women theologians, HIV and AIDS is far from being just a sexual morality issue-rather, as many repeatedly underline, it is a developmental issue, a gender issue, a justice issue, an international relations issue, a race issue, a poverty issue'. She further noted that the justice orientated approach by *The Circle* theologians resulted in their commitment to 'expose all the culture and circumstances

that make women, children and the girl-child vulnerable to HIV and AIDS' (Dube 2009a:176). Some of the weaknesses noted by Dube included homogenising African women and men and excluded positive aspects of culture (Dube 2009a:181).

These legacies of *The Circle* illustrate the capacity of Circle theology to generate liberating theologies in contexts of oppression.

Kairos and The Circle

As mentioned in the introduction, *Kairos* refers to an opportune time for responding to a crisis of injustice that is legitimated by existing theologies as reflected in *The Kairos Document*. There are critical lessons to be learnt from this document; however, only two will be highlighted, namely, the intent of the authors of the document and the formulation of a prophetic practical theology engaged in the struggle for justice and democracy. Firstly, the intent of the theologians:

We as a group of theologians have been trying to understand the theological significance of this moment in our history. It is serious, very serious. For very many Christians in South Africa this is the KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for the Church, for the Gospel and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable. (South African History Online, n.d.a:n.p.)

The theological framing of oppression in the *Kairos Document* provides a critical lesson for *The Circle* to urgently respond to the multiple forms of oppression in contemporary Africa that face women and other marginalized groups through liberating theologies which empower Christians to act justly in solidarity with oppressed groups. Thus *The Circle* can neither remain passive nor choose which groups to represent as all oppressed groups require liberating prophetic theologies.

Secondly, the formulation of a prophetic liberation theology which empowered Christians to take a stand for justice and participate in the struggle against apartheid as articulated in the following quotation:

We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand. (South African History Online, n.d.b:n.p.)

The underlying message of *The Kairos Document* for *The Circle* is to return to the trenches where the oppressed are, listen to their experiences, reflect together and produce liberation theologies. For instance, in a context of violence against LGTBIQ and silence of churches and Christians, *The Circle* must challenge oppressive theologies and lead the way in mainstreaming liberation theologies for these groups. This requires intentional discourses of inclusion and accountability.

Inclusion and *The Circle*

The question of inclusion in *The Circle* must confront gender bias that excludes differences among women, men and LGBTBIQ. Connell (2005:1805) observed that 'in almost all policy discussions, to adopt a gender perspective substantially means to address women's concerns'. One of the outcomes of exclusion is that the gendered experiences of many are excluded. For example, men are often perceived as homogenous group equally benefiting from patriarchy. These perceptions have been disproved by masculinity studies. Connell (2000:24) describes masculinities as multiple, evolving and existing in hierarchical and often conflictual relationships with dominant or hegemonic masculinities which represent the ideals of manhood in each society. Research findings on male violence in Southern and East Africa (Niehaus 2005; Silberschmidt 2005) found that sexual violence was largely due to failure in meeting the ideals of hegemonic masculinities. The silence of churches to violence against LGBTBIQ persons can be correlated to theologies of condemnation of their sexuality. An inclusive gender analysis as well as accountability are crucial for *The Circle* to respond as a liberating voice for all.

Accountability and *The Circle*

Accountability is critical to the integrity of *The Circle* because it examines the relationships that exist with oppressed groups. For example, are grass-roots women consulted and informed about research done by theologians in *The Circle*? As the work of *The Circle* is in written form and in academic language, how accessible is it to women and particularly those at the margins who are illiterate or have no means for accessing the books? As noted earlier some oppressed groups like LGBTBIQ have been excluded. How can *The Circle* build relationships of accountability with these groups? Accountability means as Collins (2000:266) explains with reference to black women's epistemology that 'Black feminist thought must be validated by ordinary African-American women' whose responsibility is to 'engage in dialogues about their findings with ordinary everyday people'. This means that going forward *The Circle* must find ways of promoting relationships of accountability with oppressed groups and disseminating research findings as well as liberation theologies in dialogue with them.

Trinitarian theology as a liberating framework for *The Circle*

'The God of Christian theology is always and only the triune God' (McBrien 1981:362). As discussed in the introduction, God is three different persons in one God, that is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Significantly, the differences do not create a hierarchy or inequality within the Trinity but a communion of relationships 'with each of the three persons totally related and transparent to the other two' (O'Collins 1999:9). These relationships reflect God's being as relational (Schwöbel 1995:132). However, it took four centuries of debate on issues similar to those in gender discourse on the relationship

between equality and difference. The issue was resolved in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed in 381 that described the Trinity as *mia ousia treis hypostaseis* that is one divine substance and three hypostases. There is one divinity and three distinct personal identities (O'Collins 1999:132). The Trinity therefore is a communion of difference, equality, mutuality and love that is committed to justice and liberation as evidenced in the salvation of humanity. As noted in the introduction, the shift from masculine gendering of the Trinity to an emphasis on their relationships is a characteristic of SMT. This has implications on theologies of persons and their relationships because humanity according to Christianity is created in the image of Trinitarian God. Boff (1988) explains the implication as follows:

In the Trinity there is no domination by one side, but convergence of the Three in mutual acceptance and giving. They are different but none is greater or lesser, before or after. Therefore a society that takes its inspiration from Trinitarian communion cannot tolerate class differences, dominations based on power (economic, sexual or ideological) that subjects those who are different to those who exercise that power and marginalizes the former from the latter. (p. 151)

This extremely brief rendition of Trinitarian theology is meant to create a point of reference and resource for *Circle* theologians to develop in dialogue with oppressed groups, multiple theologies of liberation specific to each oppressed group which could promote solidarity and interdependence among oppressed groups. For example liberation theologies for women with disabilities would be both distinctive and connected to other liberation theologies of oppressed groups such as heterosexual women and LGBTBIQ because oppressed groups share a common struggle for justice and equality. Thus no oppressed group needs to struggle for liberation in isolation from other oppressed groups. Hence the Trinitarian symbol of 'unity-in-distinction' and 'distinction-in-unity' (O'Collins 1999:179) provides a model for unity and interdependence among oppressed groups based on their shared experiences of oppression that does not sacrifice difference. By creating liberation theologies that reflect unity-in-diversity among oppressed groups, *The Circle* could pioneer inclusive theologies which not only give voice to multiple forms of oppression but also promote a prophetic model of communities where difference as is in the case of the Trinity is constructed in relationships characterised by equality, interdependence and unity. This model concurs with Oduyoye's poem of an evolving circle where all are included in the pursuit of justice.

Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to the informal conversation on shifting *The Circle* from 'moving in circles' to moving in sync with its legacy of liberating theologies for women and extending these to include all oppressed groups, particularly where there is theological justification for their oppression. An inclusive gender analysis together with a retrieval of the past within a theological framework of justice that constructs difference as equality was proposed in the form of

Sankofa–Kairos methodology within the framework of Trinitarian theology, particularly SMT. This framework has the potential to generate liberation theologies based on different experiences of oppression that are connected to each other, ultimately contributing to just communities where difference is constructed as equality. This limited appropriation of Trinitarian theology is not meant to be exhaustive but to be an entry point for further studies into this rich heritage of Christian theology that is foundational to discourses on humanity and justice and thus provides a resource for *The Circle* to move in sync with the poetic vision of Oduyoye.

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