

Gender and sexualities in African contexts and Circle theologies



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It started to live when it was conceived in 1988. It became alive when it was established in 1989. It was alive since then through to its pan-African meeting in Cameroon in 2007. Although it might have revealed signs of deterioration since Yaounde, it was still alive! The following, among many of its achievements, including the publication of some books and numerous scientific articles and chapters in specialist books written by its individual members, can be cited as cases in point: Weren't some of its members participants at the historic meeting of the joint theological societies of Southern Africa at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, in July 2009? Did its members not participate in the 25th anniversary of its existence in December 2009 in Accra, the same city in which it was born? Did it not hold a successful pan-African meeting in Kempton Park, Gauteng, here in South Africa in 2013? Its new executive committee, co-ordinated by one of its older members, the former Southern African regional coordinator, convened at a seminar as guest lecturers hosted by the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria, last November. The seminar focussed on its legacy. Whose legacy? The preceding is none other than the Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereinafter referred to as the Circle). The articles contained in this Special Issue of *Verbum et Ecclesia* (hereinafter referred to as *VE*) were first presented as papers at that historic seminar held from 04 to 07 November 2015 at Unisa. The seminar was historic in that it was for the first time since its inception more than five decades ago as the erstwhile Department of Old Testament at Unisa, now the merged Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, that the department had invited and hosted five African women theologians at once as its guests. It is thus our pleasure to dedicate all these articles to this important women's theological formation on the African continent, the Circle, and to all our foremothers, mothers and sisters who worked hard towards the Circle's establishment, nurture and sustenance. We appreciate your continued guidance and nurture of both established and especially the generation of emerging Circle theologians.

A brief history of the Circle is now in order. Concerned about issues of social justice, especially as they pertained to the African female folk, Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye convened a meeting of a group of African women theologians in August 1988. The main objective of the preceding meeting was to strategise on the formation of a Circle. The women met as an International Planning Committee in Geneva, Switzerland. The Circle was subsequently established in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. Worth noting is the point made by Isabel A. Phiri, one of the Circle's former general coordinators, that the main objective behind the establishment of the Circle was to '... research, write and publish from the experiences of African women in religion and culture'. In their nature, Circle theologies and biblical hermeneutics are contextual and biased towards the experiences of the African female folk (both women and girl children). We are therefore persuaded that the theme which is addressed by this Special Issue of *VE*, that is, the theme on 'Gender and Sexualities in Varying African Contexts', also given its urgency even in our day, is a fitting one to honour the legacy of the Circle. Noteworthy is the fact that since its inception in 1989 to date, Circle theologies and biblical hermeneutics have continued to make a mark both on the African continent and globally.

That Christianity has become not only the major religion but also a fast-growing one in sub-Saharan Africa is a conclusive fact. That the members of the African female folk, irrespective of their age, class and geography among others, are the majority of the adherents of Christianity is a fact. However, for years, the Bible and theology have hardly been approached from the perspective of African women's experiences. In their commitment to continuing the legacy of the Circle, and thus deliberately foregrounding gender as an important key to unlock both the Bible and theology, the authors in this Special Issue engage a scarcely addressed topic both in our churches and in academia alike. In our view, the authors are thus perhaps embarking on an ambitious, yet necessary project in our African contexts, that is, the topic on Gender and Sexualities in Varying African Contexts. The theme being addressed here is ground-breaking because it encourages research which 'challenges traditional discourses within and between the fields of biblical,

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religious, social and human sciences as well as the constructive engagement with the natural sciences'. Significantly, the articles in this Special Issue are an amalgam of research and thinking that bring together fields such as theology, Old and New Testament studies, social sciences, gender studies and health studies.

This Special Issue is unique because it also draws to the debate on gender and sexualities the voices of African male biblical scholars. The latter tradition was initiated at the Yaounde pan-African Circle Meeting in 2007. The interesting variety of pertinent issues explored by the authors in this volume range from the challenge which continues to be posed by the pandemic of HIV and AIDS to gender-based violence; same sexualities in African communities; forms of masculinities; patriarchy as manifested in other gender-based violence, violent theology and biblical hermeneutics and even in (South) Africa's apparent allergy to female presidential leadership. The present issue is therefore timely because it offers a contribution on pertinent issues which are, albeit rarely, researched on by theologians and biblical scholars regionally, continentally and within the global academic community.

In her article titled, 'Voice of the Voiceless: The Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians', Hazel O. Ayanga reasons that since its formation in 1989, the Circle has been and continues to be the voice for and on behalf of the (voiceless) African women in religion, culture and theology. More than three decades down the line though, there is a need for an evaluation of the Circle's legacy. The preceding need is triggered by this question: How has the Circle been a voice for the voiceless in mentoring women who venture into academia? The latter question presupposes that the failure to mentor emerging women theologians would mute the voice of the Circle in the years to come. This article therefore seeks to examine the present activities (read: voice) of the Circle including research and publication.

In his article, 'The Legacy of Circle Women's Engagement with the Bible: Reflections from an African Male Biblical Scholar', Lovemore Togarasei (LT) considers the legacy of the Circle women theologians in the area of biblical interpretation. LT discusses the Circle biblical scholars' methods of interpreting the Bible and the manner in which such methods have been contextual. Not only does LT point out areas in biblical scholarship that still call for attention, but he also concludes that the Circle biblical scholarship is engaged with modern contexts, attempting to give solutions to pressing societal needs and thus making an important contribution to intellectual growth.

As recent debates on same sexualities are basically framed in a modern discourse, no room is usually left for traditional African epistemologies. Lindiwe (Khuzwayo) Mkasi's article, 'African Same Sexualities and Indigenous Knowledge: Creating a Space for Dialogue within Patriarchy' complements this issue's broad focus on gender and sexualities. She argues that knowledge of same sexualities in African communities requires a far more complex narrative which is inclusive of

indigenous knowledge systems and cultures, particularly those of the older generations who uphold and continue to nurture indigenous knowledge systems and cultures. Same sexualities research needs to be contextualised and analysed through the eyes of African indigenous societies. This could be achieved by creating space for debates between traditional and modern communities. The current theme on 'Gender and sexualities in African contexts and Circle theologians' provides a fitting theoretical framework that is worthy of consideration in the debates on same sexualities in Africa.

Amid the contesting views on female presidential leadership in present-day South Africa, also aware that patriarchy continues to raise its ugly head in South Africa, even 21 years into democracy, V. Ndikhokele N. Mtshiselwa and Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (VNNM and MM) in their article, 'South African Female Presidential Leadership and the Inevitability of a Donga as Final Destination? Reading the Deuteronomistic Athaliah the Bosadi Way', also prompted by their commitment towards gender transformation, employ the *Sepedi*/Northern Sotho proverb, *tša etwa ke ye tshadi pele, di wela ka leope* (once they are led by a female one [cow], they will fall into a donga) as a hermeneutical tool to re-read the *Deuteronomistic Athaliah* in a woman-friendly way. In the essay 'South African Female Presidential Leadership ...', VNNM and MM have identified that apart from patriarchy, other factors such as competency, ethical concerns, as well as the politics of patronage, contributed to the plight of *Deuteronomistic Athaliah* as a political leader. The preceding factors, argue VNNM and MM, are also visible in the present South African debates regarding whether Dlamini-Zuma, a woman, could be the successor of the male president. All human leaders, irrespective of their gender, have their own weaknesses. Persuaded by the *bosadi* concept, and the authors' commitment to the transformation of African-South African women's contexts, VNNM and MM challenge the notion that once cattle are led by a female one, they are bound to fall into a donga.

The psalms of lament in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) point to periods of both national crisis and individual crisis. The messages of some of the pre-exilic prophets were thus typified, whether literally or metaphorically, by death and hope. Informed by the perspective of a lament psalm such as Psalm 6 and the crisis brought by Israel's experience of exile, MM and VNNM reason that if there is any crisis which the African people located within the sub-Saharan continent has ever come to experience, it is the crisis brought by the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. In their article, 'Dangling between Death and Hope: Re-reading Psalm 6 in Light of the Circle Gender-Sensitive-HIV and AIDS Hermeneutics', MM and VNNM engage the works of Circle theologians and biblical scholars to see what kind of reading could emerge if Psalm 6 is re-read, gender and HIV and AIDS consciously? They argue that the justice-seeking struggle of Circle theologians and biblical scholars and all must remain fierce as we all continue to dangle between faith and doubt, courage and despair, death and hope, also stubbornly holding onto the faith that the God of life has the power to correct the

wrongs related to the crisis brought by the pandemic of HIV and AIDS in present-day African contexts.

Drawing on the legacy of Mercy A. Oduyoye, Nontando M. Hadebe (NMH), in her article titled, “‘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’, argues that a Circle is eternal, expansive and evolving. A Circle is sustained by self-critique, accountability, inclusiveness and connectedness to the surrounding reality. The concept of Sankofa-Kairos, although rooted in the past, is responsive to the present. NMH argues that the ‘backward-forward’ theological method is critical for the Circle to remain true to its mission as a liberating, theological and cultural voice for and of the oppressed. Interestingly, the Trinitarian theology provides theological resources for Sankofa-Kairos theologies which will be accountable to all oppressed groups, contributing to their restoration. NMH thus urges the Circle to use Trinitarian theology as a model for liberating relationships that are characterised by equality, difference, mutuality, communion and oneness.

The contribution made by Adekunbi Labeodan (AL), titled ‘Revisiting the Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Today: A Lesson in Strength and Perseverance’ is intriguing. Why? AL presents a historical review of the Circle from its inception to date. She critically analyses the challenges which were faced by the Circle’s founding mothers, also giving an analysis of how they managed to overcome obstacles as African women theologians in predominantly patriarchal communities. The qualitative research methodology, including the results of an interview with one of the key founding mothers of the Circle, namely Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye, is used as a way of drawing from the wealth of experience of Circle theologians with a view to resolving challenges faced by Circle members today.

Zorodzai Dube, in his article, ‘Intersecting Alternative Masculinities with Race and Economy in (South) Africa’ argues that discussions on the New Alternative Masculinities (NAM) hide other pertinent discourses. The occasion to celebrate the Circle’s legacy enables us to appraise critical tools such as NAM, which serve as a narrative prosthesis against gender-based violence and child abuse. The article intersects discussions on NAM with race and class in South Africa to explore how they (unintentionally?) reproduce dormant colonial discourses and stereotypes, thus leaving untouched structural economic issues caused by capitalism.

Concerned about the relative passivity and silence of the Circle within the Francophone context of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in general and her Mongolese context in particular, Marthe Maleke Kondemo (MMK) in her article, titled ‘What Now of the Vashti Character in the Hebrew Bible? Ruminating on the Future of the Circle among Emerging Scholars in DRC’, uses the marginalised character of Vashti in the Hebrew Bible to see which light Vashti might shed in the DRC. A cardinal question posed by MMK is: May Vashti’s boldness, courage and independence encourage Congolese

women in their efforts to make a positive impact on their glaringly patriarchal contexts, even today after many years of the country’s political independence?

Currently, religious violence threatens the fabric of African nations, also leading to many a victim of gender-based violence (GBV). In her essay, ‘Circle Women’s Role in Curbing Religious Violence in Africa’, Sylvia Owusu-Ansah looks at the role played by the older generation of the Concerned African Women Theologians (cf. especially Mercy A. Oduyoye) in the struggle against GBV in West Africa. These Circle theologians have set a pace in giving platform for women’s activities to minimise GBV. The emerging generation of Circle members are thus encouraged to continue the struggle for women’s emancipation, empowered to aspire for more independence and top positions. The challenge to the present and future Circle members is to contribute significantly to the struggle against GBV and religious harmony in Africa and beyond.

Concluding this Special Issue is the article by Anastasie Masanga-Maoponda (AMM), ‘The Impact of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – French Zone on Church and African Theology Issues’. According to AMM, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founder of the Circle, encouraged African women theologians to approach theology and the Bible from the perspectives of various African regions. What contribution can the Circle make to present-day African contexts? In this article, AMM engages the themes pursued by women theologians like Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube to check their transformative impacts (if any) on African theology. AMM poses critical questions such as: Did the works of the preceding scholars impact on the Francophone African women’s contexts? Also, how may future Francophone African women’s scholarship benefit from such a legacy?

What ties all the essays together in this Special Issue is their engagement of the legacy of the Circle, hence each author’s deliberate effort in foregrounding the experiences of African women regarding gender and sexualities in their God- and Bible-talk. The reader is thus provided with relevant insights that may be used by academia, the church and policy makers among others, on the African continent, to address issues such as: persistent patriarchies and the continued violation of human (women’s) rights, the pandemic of HIV and AIDS, GBV, female presidential leadership in African contexts, same sexualities, liberating masculinities and equitable allocation and distribution of economic resources. While the authors made an attempt to reflect on some of the more salient issues on the topic of gender and sexualities in varying African contexts in light of the legacy of the Circle, there are limits to what one journal issue can accommodate. It is our hope that this Special Issue of *VE* will contribute to the ongoing conversation about the Bible and theology, particularly from the perspectives of African women’s experiences and supportive African male theologians and biblical scholars. The struggle for the emancipation and affirmation of African women and girl children thus, in our view, continues.