



# Completing the Circle

## *Treks, Trends, and Trajectories of Circle Theology*

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### Abstract

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is celebrating thirty-five years of communal theology through research and writing and through intentional mentorship to increase the number of women in the pulpits and in academia. This is a milestone in the study of theology from the perspectives of women. This article records milestones of the Circle in achieving its mandate using a narrative methodology, reviewing the themes of Circle theology from what has been published. These themes are rooted in the lived realities of the women in living their faith. Like an expanding circle, the theology continues to expand as theology is not what we receive but what we struggle with.

### Résumé

Le Cercle des Théologiennes Africaines Concernées célèbre trente-cinq ans de théologie communautaire par la recherche et l'écriture et par un mentorat intentionnel visant à augmenter le nombre de femmes dans les chaires et dans les universités. Il s'agit d'une étape importante dans l'étude de la théologie du point de vue des femmes. Cet article retrace les étapes franchies par le Cercle dans l'accomplissement de son mandat en utilisant une méthodologie narrative, en passant en revue les thèmes de la théologie du Cercle à partir de ce qui a été publié. Ces thèmes sont enracinés dans les réalités vécues par les femmes dans l'exercice de leur foi. Comme un cercle en expansion, la théologie continue de s'étendre car la théologie n'est pas ce que nous recevons mais ce avec quoi nous luttons.

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**Resumo**

O Círculo de Mulheres Africanas Teólogas Preocupadas está a celebrar trinta e cinco anos de teologia comunitária através da investigação e da escrita e através da orientação intencional para aumentar o número de mulheres nos púlpitos e no meio académico. Este é um marco no estudo da teologia a partir da perspectiva das mulheres. Este artigo regista os marcos do Círculo no cumprimento do seu mandato, utilizando uma metodologia narrativa, revendo os temas da teologia do Círculo a partir do que foi publicado. Estes temas estão enraizados nas realidades vividas pelas mulheres na vivência da sua fé. Como um círculo em expansão, a teologia continua a expandir-se, uma vez que a teologia não é o que recebemos mas aquilo com que lutamos.

**Keywords**

Circle theology, African women, African theology

**Mots-clés**

Théologie du Cercle, femmes africaines, théologie africaine

**Palavras-chave**

Teologia do Círculo, mulheres africanas, teologia africana

*Mercy Oduyoye is calling to the Circle*

*After Many Publications*

*Many Celebrations*

San wo ekyir, Sankofa <sup>1</sup>

*More women at the pulpit*

*More women academics*

*Changing of legislations*

*Mainstreaming of gender* <sup>2</sup>

The imagery of our title, *Completing the Circle*, is deliberately multivalent: it conveys that the circle continually expands to include everyone, symbolising the ongoing struggle for everyone to live a dignified life and the collective process of completion through solidarity and mutual support. From 1 to 5 July

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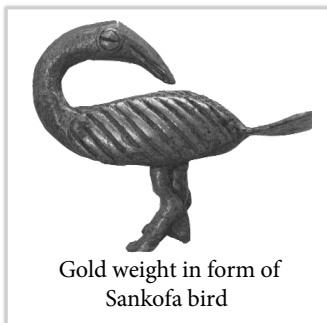
<sup>1</sup> 'San we ekyir' is a Fante phrase; 'sankofa' is the anglicization of a Twi phrase; the phrases are synonymous (see the following paragraph below for a definition). Fante and Twi are both dialects of Akan. Some 80% of Ghanaians speak an Akan language as a first or second language.

<sup>2</sup> First two verses of the Circle's theme song.

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2024, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth Circle) undertook its first pilgrimage to its place of birth, Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon Ghana, for a Pan-African and African Diaspora conference on the theme of Mother Earth, Pandemics, Gender, and Religions / Culture / Ethics / Philosophy / African Literature to celebrate thirty-five years of writing theology since its inception in 1989. The word *Sankofa* comes from the Akan people of Ghana. It derives from an imperative Akan phrase, *san kɔfa!*, meaning “go back and get it!” One of the Adinkra symbols for Sankofa depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward.<sup>3</sup> It therefore signifies revisiting one’s roots in order to move forward.

In this article, we are reviewing the treks, trends, and trajectories of African women’s theology, or Circle theology, in order to revisit the roots of the Circle story. We are also highlighting the contributions of African women theologians to the study of Theology in Africa in general. While the story of Circle theology begins officially in 1989 at a Conference in Ghana under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the roots of African Women’s Theology go back to pre-colonial and colonial Africa. In pre-colonial Africa, Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684–1706) of the Christian kingdom of Kongo appropriated Christian doctrines within African sociocultural, religious and political contexts. She challenged the Portuguese colonial project of cultural imperialism, racism, and slavery.<sup>4</sup> In colonial Africa, Afua Kuma (1908–1987) of Ghana can be described as the first modern African modern oral theologian on the doctrine of christology. She used African idioms and social-cultural themes to talk about Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> The post-colonial period gave birth to



Gold weight in form of  
Sankofa bird

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<sup>3</sup> Image courtesy of Arts of Africa collection of the Brooklyn Museum (New York City) and Wikimedia Commons, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license, converted to grayscale with background digitally removed. Original image file available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn\\_Museum\\_45.11.5\\_Gold\\_Weight\\_in\\_Form\\_of\\_Sankofa\\_Bird.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_45.11.5_Gold_Weight_in_Form_of_Sankofa_Bird.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see John Thornton, *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706*.

<sup>5</sup> Madam Kuma’s oral theologizing has been transcribed and collected by others. Those who can read Twi, one of the literary dialects of Akan, should see her *Kwaebirentuw ase Yesu: Afua Kuma ayeyi ne mpaebo*. This is also available in English translation as *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, a pdf of which has been made legally available on the website of *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* at <https://dacb.org/resources/bio-pdfs/ghana/afua-e-read.pdf>. More recently a new

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African Theology which explicitly represented Africa's Christian voices. But for three decades, published written African theology was overwhelmingly articulated by males, until Mercy Amba Oduyoye's *Hearing and Knowing*, published in 1986, un-muted the voice of women to begin to articulate theology from their perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

Then in September 1989, the first meeting of the Circle took place, in Accra, Ghana, with a gathering of sixty-nine women. The papers presented were published in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* in 1992. In their introduction to that volume, Kanyoro and Oduyoye begin by observing that "as long as men and western strangers continue to write exclusively about Africa, African women will continue to be represented as if they were dead"<sup>7</sup> or absent. It was with that conviction that Oduyoye had earlier begun to look for her African sisters in churches and universities who had undertaken (or were undertaking) theological and religious studies, to initiate a programme of serious study, research, and publishing on religion and culture. It was from those efforts, with the support of those who shared her passion, that the idea of gathering a small group of African women theologians to launch an institute in religion and culture was conceived, leading to the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an ecumenical and interfaith body of African women theologians who are concerned about interrogating the impact of religion and culture on African women.

Circle theology is characterized by themes captured in two key phrases. The first is the word spoken by Jesus to Jairus's dead daughter, whom Jesus raised from the dead (Mark 5:22–23, 35–43; Luke 8:41–42, 49–56): "*Talitha Koum!*" ('Little girl, arise!').<sup>8</sup> Applying this command to African Christian women,

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collection of previously unpublished material has also been made available in English: Afua Kuma, *The Surprising African Jesus: The Lost Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*. See also Sara J. Fretheim's articles, "Afua Kuma," *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*; and "Jesus! Say It Once Again and the Matter is Settled": The Life and Legacy of Oral Theologian Madam Afua Kuma of Ghana (1908–1987)."

<sup>6</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*.

<sup>7</sup> Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Introduction," in *The Will to Arise*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> The Aramaic phrase Jesus used, transliterated into the Greek New Testament Ταλειθά κοῦμ (*Taleithá koum*; Greek: 'little girl, arise!' or 'little girl, get up!') in Mark 5:41 and often transliterated into English as either *Talitha qumi* or *Talitha cum*, has captured the imagination of African women, and is often used in works published by Circle members. See, e.g., Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *Talitha, qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, 1989*; and Nyambura Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, eds., *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women*.

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Circle theology is about empowering women to tell their own faith stories rather than relying on others to write about them. The second phrase is “a one-winged bird cannot fly.” Oduyoye compared then-current African theologies to a one-winged bird because the discipline was controlled and dominated by men. But Oduyoye and her colleagues recognized that “a bird with one wing cannot fly and that the foot that stays to crush another cannot move either.”<sup>9</sup> The exclusion of women from theological education, scholarship, and institutional leadership was analogous to leaving one wing off a bird and still believing it could fly. Oduyoye asserted that for theology to fly, that is to be a thriving and living discipline, it must have the input of women. It must be a discipline with two healthy wings.

Oduyoye notes that

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.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the circle is that of no beginning and no end, no front or back seat: the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and their theologizing is ever expanding, developing, and becoming. For generations, theological education was the exclusive province of males. When women were allowed to attend, they often were restricted to classes that taught them how to be good wives of clergymen and theologians. This exclusion was based on patriarchal values and economics. Patriarchal values dictated that formal education and theological leadership were male endeavors. From an economic perspective, the institutional church controlled theological education as well as any scholarship or church employment that would come from that education. Churches funded the schools and the candidates as well as prescribing the curriculum, which assumed male leadership. From the perspective of church leaders, money spent on theological education for women was money wasted as women could not be ordained or hold leadership positions in many churches and even when they

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<sup>9</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, untitled poem.

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could, it was the assumption of a patriarchal system that they would marry and move to their husbands' communities and churches.

To develop holistic theologies, African women theologians have worked to engender theological education. This process includes developing, critiquing, and implementing curricula for theological institutions with the goal of having gender sensitive curricula and the inclusion of women's voices and issues in theological training. Engendering theological education also includes advocating for the inclusion of women students and professors in those institutions and advocating for the ordination of women and placement of women in leadership roles that local churches and other religious institutions have often limited to men.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of a one-winged bird has also been applied within the workings of women's theological scholarship and community engagement. For example, African women theologians recognize the need for a second wing in biblical hermeneutics and encourage seeking the input of women who are not formal theologians but who are steeped in oral theology based on their experiences and on the experiences and teachings of their ancestors. The second wing of the bird also includes recognizing and finding value in differences among women in faith affiliation, tribal and cultural backgrounds, class, and marital status. For African women theologians, the incorporation of these different voices serves to advance not only their scholarly endeavors but their ability to speak to and act on issues that impact them personally as individuals and as part of their communities.

### **Methodologies of Circle Theology**

Circle theology is not limited to a single theological methodology, as African women theologize from different perspectives. In reading Circle theology, one is presented with various ways of doing theology, the implementation of which relies heavily on the conditions or the context in which theology is applied, and the person or community involved. An important root common to many Circle writings is narrative theology. Related to this is paring theological scholarship with praxis. The aim of scholarship with praxis is to include all voices and to experience liberation of all in the community.

In *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Oduyoye offers an insightful overview of theology from the perspective of African women:

In doing theology African women adopt a perspectival approach rather than analysis and critique of existing work. . . . Rather, the approach is that of dialogue as women aim at affirmations, continued questioning of tradition in view of contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., see Esther Mombo and Heleen Jozisses, eds., *If You Have No Voice, Just Sing!*

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challenges, and as they struggle with making their own contribution to the creation of theologies that respond to the demands of spirituality. There is very little refutation and apologetic to be gleaned from African women's theology. What is present are statements of faith and the basis for such affirmations.<sup>12</sup> She emphasizes the importance of storytelling — “the approach to theology, that has characterized women, is to tell a story and then to reflect upon it.”<sup>13</sup> Reflection on the Bible is foundational in African women's theologies. But all such reflection necessarily takes place within a given context and culture. Aware of this, Circle theology emphasizes context(s) and culture(s). From such sources, theologians like Oduyoye have reflected on theology, e.g. “women's words about God”: christology, Christian anthropology, ecclesiology, Christian life (e.g. hospitality and spirituality), and eschatology.<sup>14</sup> These and others are themes covered in the writings of Circle Women theologians.

Like the African worldviews it addresses, Circle theology is holistic and is interested in more than theory. Thus, Sarojini Nadar observes that “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.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Teresia Mbari Hinga describes African women's theology as being “primarily concerned with concrete issues of life as experienced.”<sup>16</sup> She proposes that the church should not impose inculturation but should allow “inculturation from below.”<sup>17</sup> Both Nadar and Hinga straightforwardly and yet gently bring awareness to the unnecessary and often harmful duality that is brought to theological scholarship and to religious practice. Theology, and even at times liturgy, becomes separated from the lives of individuals, especially individuals who are not connected with the academy and/or the institutional church hierarchy.

## **Theological themes**

### ***Bible and cultural hermeneutics***

Due to the significant influence of religious texts in shaping the worldviews of adherents, which in turn affects the status of women within faith communities, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians engages in

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<sup>12</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Feminist Theologies in Africa,” 276.

<sup>16</sup> Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist*, 67.

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the study and interpretation of the Bible. This includes a critical analysis of the hidden gender-oppressive scripts in the Bible, as well as the ways in which biblical texts have been (mis)used to subjugate women. Circle theologians like Musa Dube and Madipoane Masenya notes that the translation of the Bible into local languages led to the massive expansion of Christianity in Africa.<sup>18</sup> It is also through these translations that some African Instituted Churches were founded. However, adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion in interpreting scripture, Dube and Masenya highlight that biblical texts were often read through the lenses of missionary and colonial positions and in a gendered way.

The Circle has employed alternative methods of reading the Bible that reveal how centuries of patriarchal interpretation have left the plight of African women unresolved. These methods interrogate and challenge the underlying patriarchal tendencies that have attempted to explain or justify texts that appear to sanction the oppression of women. In rejecting models of interpretation that are not liberating, Circle theologians have been creative and versatile, employing methods such as hermeneutics of suspicion, cultural hermeneutics, and postcolonial hermeneutics to read the Bible. For Circle members, biblical studies have shifted from historical exegesis to contextual reading and interpretation. This shift signifies that women are no longer primarily interested merely in reconstructing the original text of the Bible but in finding meaning, guidance, and empowerment within the biblical narrative for their present-day lives. Musimbi Kanyoro articulates the premises of African women theologians that the Bible itself is not inherently an instrument of women's oppression; rather, it is the biased interpretation of the Bible, often vested with ulterior motives, that has led to such oppression. Therefore, women do not require liberation from the Bible itself but rather from the oppressive interpretations that have historically been imposed upon it.<sup>19</sup>

For members of the Circle, their hermeneutics are deeply informed by the context in which they live and work, a context that includes survival in harsh conditions of oppression, exploitation, and male dominance. In this environment, a reader-centered approach to scripture is more appropriate than the "historical-critical method," which is often seen as suited to "white, male, and middle-class academics" who "can afford to be 'impartial'" — impartiality here meaning non-committal.<sup>20</sup> African women theologians have audaciously reclaimed the power to reinterpret scriptures and assert their right to read, interpret, and listen to the scriptures through their own eyes and ears, in ways

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., Musa W. Dube, "Consuming a Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28–34; 15.22; 10.8.)"

<sup>19</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, 13–15.

<sup>20</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, "Racism and Ethocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," 103.



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that are life-affirming for all human beings, both women and men. Writing about feminist interpretations in Africa, Teresa Okure notes that African women's distinctive approach to biblical interpretation involves doing theology from a women's perspective.<sup>21</sup> This approach is characterized by inclusiveness; it considers both men and women in interpreting scripture and includes scholars and non-scholars, the rich and the poor. It also embraces diverse methodologies, including scientific, creation-centered, and popular methods.

One significant contribution to this field is the edited volume entitled *Other Ways of Reading*,<sup>22</sup> which exemplifies how women chose to interpret biblical texts using communal and narrative methods. These methods include reason, tradition, cultural and historical conditions, and lived experiences to unveil the cultural baggage hidden in scriptures that emphasizes the subordination of women. The narrative methodology is particularly resonant with African communities, where storytelling is a vital means of re-enacting communal history, instilling moral discipline, and passing on information. Storytelling, a method primarily used by women, also serves as a way for individuals to identify themselves, to think, and represent their realities.

Musimbi Kanyoro has significantly contributed to the development of feminist cultural hermeneutics. Her work emphasizes the importance of interpreting the Bible through the lens of African culture, recognizing the pivotal role that cultural context plays in shaping religious experiences and understanding. Exploring the African context and the reading of the Bible together, she argues that cultural hermeneutics is essential because it empowers unheard women and men to speak out, providing an opportunity for their questions and perspectives to contribute to understanding what God is communicating through scripture.<sup>23</sup> Kanyoro sets out the context of her hermeneutical method in experiences of rural women in Bware, Kenya and their interpretation of the book of Ruth.<sup>24</sup> It is in this context that she concludes that the dialogue between culture and the bible and the question of priority and allegiance highlights a perennial problem faced by many African Christians which Kanyoro describes as "one foot in African religion and culture and another in the church and western culture."<sup>25</sup>

Kanyoro's cultural hermeneutics is a method that closely aligns with the lived realities of African women. It interrogates the ways in which cultural practices and biblical interpretations have been used to justify the subordination

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<sup>21</sup> Teresa Okure, "Epilogue: The Will to Arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40–56," 229.

<sup>22</sup> Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*.

<sup>23</sup> Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 1–12.

<sup>24</sup> Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 32–57.

<sup>25</sup> Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 13.

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of women. She advocates for an approach that is not only critical of oppressive traditions but also seeks to reclaim cultural elements that affirm life and dignity. For Kanyoro, cultural hermeneutics involves reading the Bible alongside African cultural folktales, as both forms of narrative are significant in African women's liberation. She notes that all questions regarding the welfare and status of women in Africa are often explained within the framework of culture. Thus, cultural hermeneutics allows African women to engage with scripture in ways that are deeply connected to their cultural identities.<sup>26</sup>

Teresa Okure further elaborates on the distinction between the timeless truths of the Bible and its cultural underpinnings. She argues that rereading the Bible as a patriarchal text demands sustained efforts to discern between the divine and the human elements within it. While the divine embodies timeless truths essential for salvation, the human elements reflect socio-cultural practices that are conditioned by time and place and are, therefore, not universally applicable.<sup>27</sup> In their publications, Circle writers have focused on reading the Bible using cultural lenses. By doing so, they have been able to provide new insights that challenge traditional interpretations and offer life-affirming readings of scripture. These readings empower African women to see themselves in the biblical narrative, not as passive recipients of oppressive traditions but as active agents of their own liberation. Through cultural hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of suspicion,<sup>28</sup> Circle theologians continue to challenge oppressive interpretations of the Bible and offer alternative readings that affirm the dignity, agency, and worth of African women.

Musa Wenkosi Dube writes from a post-colonial perspective employing the decolonial theory. She has emphasized the use of indigenous hermeneutics, which are interpretive frameworks rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of African and other colonized peoples. These hermeneutics prioritize indigenous knowledge systems and ways of understanding the world. The decolonial reading is also concerned with healing and restoration. She seeks to heal the wounds inflicted by colonialism on the identities, cultures, and spiritualities of colonized peoples. This involves reinterpreting the Bible in ways that affirm the dignity and worth of indigenous peoples and their cultures.<sup>29</sup>

### **Christology**

Christology is a major theme in Circle theology; Mercy Amba Oduyoye,

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<sup>26</sup> Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> See Teresa Okure, "Enkindling Fire in the Mission: Spirit and Scope of the BISAM Project."

<sup>28</sup> Mercy A. Oduyoye, "African Women's Hermeneutics," 362.

<sup>29</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*; Dube, "Talitha Cum Hermeneutics: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible."

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Elisabeth Amoah, Teresia Hinga, and Ann Nasimiyu Wasike are among the significant contributors on this topic. In 1988, Amoah and Oduyoye published an article titled “The Christ for African Women,” in which they contended that, despite the dehumanizing challenges women face — culturally, economically, socially, and religiously — Jesus Christ serves as their liberator and savior from oppression. He empowers them in situations of powerlessness and stands as their friend and ally in the face of alienation and suffering.<sup>30</sup>

Christ, therefore, becomes the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless. Jesus becomes an African woman. Building on this theme of liberation, Teresia Hinga’s work, particularly her chapter “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa,”<sup>31</sup> offers a critical perspective on traditional christology. Hinga critiques the received theology in which Christ is presented as the primordial scapegoat, arguing that this interpretation is not liberating but rather perpetuates the oppression of women. She contends that emulating Christ as a scapegoat could reinforce the role of women as victims and scapegoats within their cultures — roles that they are already compelled to play. Hinga’s christology calls for a reimagining of Jesus not as a figure of passive suffering but as an active liberator who challenges and dismantles structures of oppression.<sup>32</sup>

Ann Nasimiyu’s christology emphasizes Jesus as a protector and nurturer of life. In her article “Christology and African Women’s Experience,” Nasimiyu highlights the redemptive incarnation of Jesus, which unites his humanity with every other human being, thereby granting dignity and justice to all.<sup>33</sup> She argues that following the way of Jesus entails a deep commitment to caring for the suffering neighbor, critiquing and calling for changes in systems that cause suffering, and working to uncover the logic that perpetuates oppressive situations. She argues for a holistic approach to Jesus’ ministry, one that integrates spiritual, social, and political liberation.

In African women’s Christologies, the narrative method is central. Narration brings to the forefront the everyday experiences, faith encounters with Jesus Christ, and the ideas and practices of women. This highlights the importance of life stories, testimonies, and songs as channels for understanding the meaning of Jesus and the Christ-event from women’s perspectives. Unlike many African male theologians who often use titles drawn from African cultural contexts, such as Jesus as Ancestor, female African theologians are cautious

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<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Christ for African Women.”

<sup>31</sup> Teresia M. Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women.”

<sup>32</sup> See Teresia M. Hinga, “Women Liberation in and through the Bible: The Debate and the Quest for a New Feminist Hermeneutics.”

<sup>33</sup> Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christology and an African Woman’s Experience.”

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about employing such images. These cultural titles derived from a patriarchal system do not fully resonate with their lived experiences as women of the saving presence of Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> Nasimiyu and Hinga advocate for a christology that affirms the dignity of African women and empowers them to challenge and transform oppressive structures in church and society. By presenting Jesus as a liberator, friend, protector, and nurturer, they offer a Christological vision that is deeply rooted in the realities of African women's lives, calling for a faith that is both life-affirming and liberating.

### **Circle Theology: Advocacy and Activism**

#### ***Health and Healing***

As well as theological themes, the Circle has been engaged in themes of theological advocacy because of combining scholarship and advocacy.<sup>35</sup> In terms of the story of the Circle, each period has had a special focus in the advocacy role. From 1989–2002, as the Circle was building its foundations, the themes interrogated how religions/cultures were constructed and their impact on women. Then from 2002–2019, the Circle focused on religion and culture with a very special focus on HIV/AIDS and the issues which HIV exposed such as Gender Based Violence. This was because of the magnitude of the impact of HIV on society in general and on women in particular. As noted above, Circle theology combines theological scholarship with praxis and that is why theological advocacy is part and parcel of doing theology. In affirming this, Hinga notes that a recognition of “the practice of injustices in church and society as a sinful betrayal of the vision of Jesus . . . African Christian women see their task as a prophetic one of unmasking and challenging such sinful practices and structures of injustices.”<sup>36</sup> The primary concern of Circle theology is to nurture life affirming theologies amid death-dealing, hope-sapping, and life-denying forces. These forces include the outbreak of pandemics, climate change, war, global economic injustices, gender-based violence, etc. In response,

Circle theology has engaged with embodied liberation in different themes, centering healing and health as significant for women and society as well. The onslaught of the HIV epidemic steered the Circle to devote time and resources into researching and publishing

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<sup>34</sup> “Heleen” Leuntje Jannetje Joziase, “Women’s Faith Seeking Life: Lived Christologies and the transformation of gender relations in two Kenyan churches,” 264–265.

<sup>35</sup> For the mutual engagement of scholarship and advocacy, see Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejía, eds., *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*; and Maria Cimperman, *Social Analysis for the 21st Century: How Faith Becomes Action*.

<sup>36</sup> Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist*, 8

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on health and healing with a special focus on HIV and AIDS for about nineteen years.<sup>37</sup>

During the global COVID-19 crisis, Circle theologians continued to engage with the questions raised by this pandemic and its impact on those on the margins. Chisale, for example, writes about COVID-19 and women with disabilities, observing that

as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the globe, particularly in Africa, women and girls with disabilities become vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, highlighting that the home is no longer a safe space for the vulnerable.<sup>38</sup>

COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges such as hunger, poverty, and high unemployment, particularly affecting women. The Circle's theology on COVID-19 is captured in two volumes that reflect on the multiple vulnerabilities of women through their lived experiences. The book *COVID-19: African Women, and the Will to Survive* is a testament to women's resilience in navigating the numerous challenges arising from the virus and the measures taken to combat it, including lockdowns.<sup>39</sup> The other text, *A Time Like No Other*,<sup>40</sup> presents women's stories during the pandemic, highlighting their fears of violence, illness, and death, as well as the profound loss of loved ones. These stories make clear that poor women have suffered the effects of the pandemic most severely.

### ***Gender-Based Violence***

Another area of theological advocacy and activism is in the area of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), particularly Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). In 2002, Isabel Apawo Phiri authored an article asking a heart wrenching question, "Why does God allow our husbands to hurt us?"<sup>41</sup> Similarly Dennis Ackerman observed that "there are two pressing issues at present that should be central to women doing theology in our part of the world, the first is the endemic nature of sexual violence against women and children. A war is being waged against bodies of women and children in this country."<sup>42</sup> The two

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<sup>37</sup> Esther Mombo, "African Women's Theology," 33.

<sup>38</sup> Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "COVID-19 and Ubuntu Disruptions: Curbing the violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities through African Women's Theology of Disability," 1.

<sup>39</sup> Helen A. Labeodan, Rosemary Amenga-Etego, Johanna Stiebert, and Mark S. Aidoo, eds, *COVID-19: African Women and the Will to Survive*.

<sup>40</sup> Nontando Hadebe, Daniela Gennrich, Susan Rackoczy, and Nobesuthu Tom, eds., *A Time Like No Other Covid-19 in Women's Voices*.

<sup>41</sup> Isabel A. Phiri, "'Why Does God Allow Our Husbands to Hurt Us?' Overcoming Violence against Women."

<sup>42</sup> Denise A. Ackerman, "Forward from the Margins: Feminist Theologies for life," 67.

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statements echo the realities confronting all Circle members doing theology in their different places. The theme of GBV and SGBV has cut across all the writings of the Circle as is apparent in the aforementioned brief bibliographical survey.<sup>43</sup> In the writings on Gender-Based Violence, it is noted that this practice is rooted in patriarchalist structures of society which value maleness as normative. There are cultural practices that marginalize women, making them vulnerable within society. Unfortunately, the texts show that the religious spaces are not immune to the same. Some teachings appear to condone GBV in these such as gendered perseverance, which Esther Mombo has called “*vumilia* (perseverance) theology.”<sup>44</sup>

### ***Mother Earth***

One of the current struggles experienced by people and nature is climate change. The theme of the Circle’s 2019 conference was “Mother Africa: Mother Earth and Religion / Theology / Ethics / Philosophy.” After having focused on Religions/Theology and HIV/AIDS from 2002–2019, at the end of the 2019 conference, the Circle adopted the themes of “Religions/Theology, the Environment and Sustainable Development Goals.”<sup>45</sup> The image “Mother Earth” is derived from the connection between the violation of women’s rights and the degradation of the Earth, which is usually described using feminine terms. There seems to be an unholy alliance of climate change crisis, the marginalization of women, the degradation of other life forms, and the degradation of the earth. Even if the Psalmist reminds us that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” (Psa 24:1), the human beings have assumed that they are only the owners of the land, forgetting they are also stewards (Gen 1:28). The failure of being stewards has led to exploitation and plundering of the very earth they are expected to tend. The results of this are experienced in long drought, cyclones, floods and pollution. Those who suffer more from these changes are the poor and the marginalized and women are among these groups. The Circle writings on climate change are intersectional, approaching the issues through the lenses of the Bible, Gender, Culture, and Economics. This approach is formulated in view of challenging the Anthropocene views of human society that are causing harm to the whole creation. Several publications on climate change and mother earth are a testimony to the Circle’s theology of advocacy and activism. So far, eight books have been published, or are in production, from this one conference, but the theme of mother is ongoing as women interrogate the connection.

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<sup>43</sup> Mombo, “African Women’s Theology,” 33.

<sup>44</sup> Esther Mombo and Heleen Joziassie, “Deconstructing Gendered *vumilia* (perseverance) Theology in times of the Gender-based Violence Pandemic.”

<sup>45</sup> “History of the Circle.”

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### **Collaboration with other feminist theologies**

Sarojini Nadar provides a helpful overview of the basic differences between African women's theologies and other feminist theologies, which we will summarize as follows. The main difference between African women's theologies and feminist theologies . . . lies in the emphasis each wishes to place on particular issues, rather than on an inherent difference in ideologies. . . . 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."<sup>46</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, we have tried to tell *her story* (the Circle theology story). We have named some of the features and themes of her story. We have also named the major methodology employed in Circle writing. This story of the Circle is not complete but continues. Mercy Oduyoye pointed out as an analogy of theology in Africa that as a one-winged bird cannot fly, African theology that only includes the voices of men is a one-winged theology.<sup>47</sup> Circle theology is the other wing so that theology can grow. The Circle has served as a vehicle for African women theologians to dialogue with and mentor other women theologians, to write and publish on issues pertinent to women. It has also created space for connecting and collaborating with other national and international organizations addressing related concerns. In supporting and nurturing women theologians, the Circle has helped the voices, perspectives, and visions of women to be heard in theological education and scholarship, and in the teachings and practices of local religious institutions. Circle theology is not complete, but a bird that continues to fly defining and redefining theology in the changing contextual realities.

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<sup>46</sup> Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," 272.

<sup>47</sup> See especially Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-Winged Theology," 43.

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<sup>48</sup> Editors' note: Recently republished as “Consuming a colonial cultural bomb: Translating *Badimo* into ‘demons’ in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28–34; 15.22; 10.8),” chapter 10 in *[Re]Gained in Translation II: Bibles, Histories, and Struggles for Identity*, edited by Sabine Dievenkorn and Shaul Levin, 251–277, TRANSÜD: Arbeiten zur Theorie und Praxis des Übersetzens und Dolmetschens 134 (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2024), [https://doi.org/10.57088/978-3-7329-9175-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.57088/978-3-7329-9175-4_11)



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