AFRICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGIES,
THE GLOBAL VILLAGE, AND THE IMPERATIVE
OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS

The Case of the Circle of Concerned
African Women Theologians

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The last several decades have witnessed the emergence of a variety of theologies of liberation as oppressed peoples around the world have responded to their oppressive circumstances. The 1960s, for example, saw the emergence of Latin American theology of liberation in response to economic injustice endemic there, while in the United States and South Africa, black theologies of liberation emerged in critical response to institutionalized racism. At the same time, feminist theology began to consolidate itself, particularly in the West as women began to respond theologically to the injustice of sexism.

Women around the globe, however, have come to realize that women’s experiences are extremely diverse. There is no such thing as a generic women’s experience to which a generic feminist theology would respond as its subject matter. The diversity of women’s experiences has therefore occasioned the rise of several feminist theologies as women around the globe wrestle with the often peculiar ways in which sexism impacts them in their particular social, political, and historical locations. Thus, in the United States, a context that is palpably diverse, feminist theologies include womanist theology, developed by women of African descent in response to what they have referred to as their “double jeopardy” of living at the intersection of racism and sexism. Mujerista theologians have also emerged, to name themselves and respond to injustices that confront them not only as women but as Latina/Hispanic women.

It was this same imperative to respond theologically to issues of injustice from their location as African women that, in 1989, led some eighty women to gather at Trinity College in Accra, Ghana. Their goal was to assess critically the status of women in Africa and to examine the role of religion and culture in shaping their lives and destinies.

This 1989 meeting in Ghana marked a turning point in African theology.
Hitherto African theology had been predominantly a male affair marked by the conspicuous absence of women's voices and disregard for issues of concern to women. Women at the Ghana convention were concerned about this situation and the consequent ineffectiveness of the theological project in Africa. Comparing the efforts of African theology at that time to the efforts of a bird trying to fly with one wing, the group emphasized the need for a second wing in the form of women's voices and analysis if the goals of such theology were to be achieved. Thus, in her keynote address, Mercy Oduyoye described the women's efforts as a legitimate quest for a "two-winged" and therefore more effective and feasible African theology.

In summarizing the central concern of women at this time, Oduyoye lamented that for many years African women had been treated as if they were dead. They had been discussed, analyzed, and spoken about and on behalf of by men and outsiders as if they were not subjects capable of self-naming and analysis of their own experiences.

In their response to this state of affairs, and taking their cue from the story of Jairus's daughter in Mark 5:41, in which Jesus summons her to arise from her apparent death, the African women appropriated Jesus' summons as their own and vowed indeed to arise and make their contribution as moral agents in the analysis of their condition and to seek viable solutions to issues of concern to them both as Africans and as women. Determined to transcend the state of apathy born out of years of imposed silence, the African women covenanted to undertake sustained research, analysis, writing, and publishing on the impact of religions and culture in their lives. Noting that religion and culture were pivotal in shaping women's experiences for good or ill, and proceeding on what feminists elsewhere have dubbed a "hermeneutics of suspicion," the women embarked on a seven-year cycle of sustained analysis of religion and culture with several specific objectives in mind:

1. To encourage and empower the critical study of the practice of religion in Africa.
2. To undertake research that unveils both positive and negative religiocultural factors, beliefs, and myths that affect, influence, or hamper women's development.
3. To publish theological literature written by African women with special focus on religion and culture.
4. To build a communications network among theologically trained women both in academia and beyond.
5. To promote a dialogic approach to religious and cultural tensions in Africa.
6. To strive toward the inclusion of women's studies in religion and culture in academia and research institutions in Africa, particularly institutions of higher education including theological institutions.
7. To empower African women to contribute to the cross-cultural discourse on women’s issues through engagement in critical cultural hermeneutics.
8. To promote ecumenism and cultural pluralism.
9. To bring African women’s theology to the attention of the general public.

The group designated themselves the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and for the last decade they have sought to fulfill their goals by articulating their concerns and analyzing those concerns in a sustained way. Despite many obstacles, not the least of which are financial constraints as well as what has been aptly called “the politics of publishing,” a nascent but distinctive African women’s theology is beginning to crystallize through the group’s research and writing initiatives.

Since 1989 the Circle has published quite a number of monographs. These include The Will to Arise, the proceedings of the papers read in 1989; Groaning in Faith; Where God Reigns; and Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God, the proceedings of the second Pan-African Congress of the Circle held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996. Not only are research and publication encouraged at the continental level, but local chapters of the Circle are also encouraged to research and publish on issues germane to their respective regions. Thus, the Kenyan chapter, for example, recently published an anthology of essays called Violence against Women, and the recently reconvened Nigerian chapter published an anthology entitled African Culture and the Quest for Women’s Rights.¹

While the general theme of religion and culture inspires the research and writing, the Circle has identified four subthemes to guide and nuance the research. These include women in the context of religious and cultural pluralism; the history and agency of African women in religion; biblical and cultural hermeneutics; and issues in the theological and ministerial formation of African women. A number of publications following these subthemes are under way, and members of the Circle continue to publish in anthologies and peer-edited journals.

The specific issues that concern African women can be gleaned from the tables of contents of their publications. These range from an analysis of the role of ritual in their lives to that of the Bible and other sacred scriptures in shaping their experiences and destinies as African women. One specific issue that has been named as being of concern to African women is power, an issue that was focused on during the second Pan-African Congress of the Circle. The specific theme at this meeting was “Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God.” The women worked with a broad definition of power to include political power and women's access, or lack of it, to such power. The title of the congress also indicated women's awareness of the need to transform power and its use so that it can be useful and transformative to women.

More recently, at the tenth anniversary of the Circle, in 1999, a conference entitled “Women and the Meaning of Jubilee” was held at the Talitha Qumi Center for Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity College in Accra. This theme resonated with the ongoing discussion on the implication of 1999 as the year of Jubilee, from a biblical perspective. At this meeting women reflected on the implications of Jubilee for them as Africans and as women.

In August 2001, yet another meeting was held at the Talitha Qumi Center. The theme of this meeting was “Overcoming Violence: Women of Faith Speak.” As a participant in the meeting, I was impressed by the women's ability to identify the complex and interlocking issues that go under the label of “violence.” The women spoke loudly and clearly against various manifestations of violence in the contemporary African context, particularly violence against women. They named and denounced domestic violence, witchcraft accusations, enslavement in the name of religion, and female circumcision. The historical roots and entanglement of violence with issues of poverty, racism, and sexism were also named and denounced. Of course, as the title of the conference indicates, the women were concerned about identifying ways of overcoming such violence beyond denouncing it and complaining about it.

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2 When in 1989 women had met at Trinity College, it was a seminary that catered primarily to male students. Those of us who visited the seminary again in 1999 were pleasantly surprised to find that it now boasts a dormitory wing especially for women. Today the seminary also features the Talitha Qumi Center for Women in Religion and Culture, founded and directed by Mercy Oduyoye, the leading African woman theologian who was instrumental in the crystallization of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as a distinctive network of women theologians in Africa. The creation of the Talitha Qumi Center and the work of Oduyoye there are, therefore, not only practically but also historically significant. The very name of the center, “Talitha Qumi,” taken from the story of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41) in which Jesus addresses the dead girl with these words, which in Aramaic mean “Daughter, arise,” is reminiscent of the spirit of the 1989 convention, whose theme was “Daughters of Africa, Arise.” It is also symbolically significant, for as African women's theology gains an increasingly distinct and recognizable shape on the continent, it is appropriate that it has also gained a concrete home and a physical space.
Thus, a major task, as they saw it, was how to begin to tackle proactively the root causes of such violence. They spoke, for example, of the importance of advocacy and creating a culture of nonviolence through education and resocialization, particularly of the youth. Representatives of various regions in Africa attending this meeting were expected to develop a platform for action when they got back home with regard to the issues identified in the meeting.

This imperative to develop a platform for action is rooted in the self-understanding of African women's theology as an applied theology, a theology that demands but is not satisfied by the mere announcing or denouncing of injustices. The women are challenged from their specific local contexts to devise practical ways of dealing with the injustices they so articulately denounce in their papers and presentations. The challenge to act is also born out of their prior self-naming not merely as objects and victims of injustice but also as moral agents capable of moral action for social transformation.

At another level, the call to develop strategies for self- and social transformation from the local context is born out of the realization that Africa itself is tremendously diverse. Issues that are absolutely urgent in one corner of the continent might be unknown or insignificant in some other corner. Thus, for example, the notorious problem of female genital mutilation is acutely problematic in countries like Kenya, whereas it is not an issue in Uganda next door. The complexities of a context like South Africa, where women are dealing with the painful legacy of centuries of institutionalized racism, demand that women living there begin to develop a theological response that is relevant for their circumstances. It is against this background that we can begin to appreciate the work of theologians like Madipoane Masenya, a pioneering South African biblical scholar who has begun to develop a more nuanced reading of the Bible from the perspective of Sotho women, a reading she calls a “Bosadi” perspective.

At the same time, the Circle encourages awareness, analysis, and solidarity across the many (often arbitrary) African borders, both physical and ideological. The periodic Pan-African Congresses provide a forum for such cross-border analyses of issues. The imperative of a Pan-African forum for analysis is demanded by the very nature of the problems, which transcend borders. The consequences of the various regional conflicts are rarely contained within the borders where the conflict arises. Many of the displaced peoples move back

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and forth as refugees across boundaries into areas, like Kakuma in Kenya, which have become almost permanent refugee camps. The enforced ebb and flow of peoples across and beyond African borders, often triggered by events and decisions made way beyond the continent, demands that women be aware of the causative factors as well as the implicit ethical issues in order to respond accordingly.\(^4\)

Even more importantly, women have come to realize that not only are the problems no respecter of borders, they are many, perennially complex, and interlocked, and the effects of the injustices on women are cumulative and multiplicative. Indeed, as Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza has so aptly put it, for many African women “gender oppression is multiplied by racist dehumanization multiplied by economic exploitation multiplied by cultural colonization multiplied by religious demonization.”\(^5\) African women recognize the urgent task not only to demolish these dehumanizing systems of oppression but also to begin a reconstruction of structures and systems that enhance Ubuntu, true humanity. In this spirit, they have identified the theme of their next Pan-African Congress as “Religion and the Quest for Peace, Health, and Wholeness: African Women Making a Difference.”

While African women, like their sisters elsewhere, have developed a theology that responds to their specific circumstances, they have come also to realize that an effective response to complex intersecting and multiplicative injustices demands the collective efforts not only of women but of all concerned with the demolition of those injustices. This recognition led the Circle in 1999 to participate as co-convener of a joint conference in Nairobi of various theological networks on the continent, including regional and country chapters of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), the Congress of Association of Theological Institutions (CATI), and, most importantly, the Organization of African Inde-

\(^4\) One of the most pressing issues of our time is the problem of the increasing rate of impoverishment in Africa. Women have been concerned to analyze the root causes of this trend. One of the root causes has been the so-called SAPs (Structural Adjustments Programs), prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank ostensibly and ironically to “fight” poverty in Africa. The Women’s Theology Desk at the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) has carefully documented how, far from being a solution to the problem of poverty in Africa, these programs have exacerbated poverty on the continent, with dire consequences, particularly for women. For details of this documentation, see the AACC documentary To Be a Woman: The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Women in Africa, prod. Visafic Productions, Women’s Desk, All African Conference of Churches, Nairobi, Kenya, 1992, videocassette.

Not only did this conference allow the members of these networks to share their insights and visions with each other but, more importantly, the forum also allowed concerned African theologians to begin to construct a common platform for action to address the complex interlocking, often shocking crises facing the continent. Responding to the imperative of solidarity demanded by these circumstances, the participants in this conference issued a joint communiqué naming twenty-two issues that demanded urgent and collective action from all concerned.

Needless to say, African women realize that we are all living in an increasingly intimate global village, where the ripple effects of an event in a seemingly remote corner of the world are experienced on the other side of the globe in quite unexpected ways. Africa has not been spared, for example, the ravages of a runaway global capitalism fostered by the notorious transnational corporations and the many economic woes they often engender in their quest for profit apparently by any means necessary. Such a globalized context demands that women be aware of global perspectives and dynamics, particularly political and economic ramifications. Even so, African women are acutely aware that they are not mere victims of global or local forces. Rather, they are determined to participate in the reconstruction and reclamation of Ubuntu as moral agents.

However, African women know that the intersecting, transborder, even global nature of the issues we face in the global village demands the collective action and mutual support of all people of goodwill. In solidarity with others who are similarly concerned with injustices in this global village, African women work toward a more just and humane global society. Realizing that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, they welcome and reach out

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6 The OAIC, or Organization of African Independent Churches, has its headquarters in Nairobi and is the umbrella network/organization for some six thousand independent churches located all over the continent. Africans founded these independent churches largely in critical response to the cultural imperialism implicit in missionary Christianity and its demand that Africans abandon their culture as a condition for becoming Christians. For many years, theologians from “mainstream” churches have tended to regard with suspicion, if not outright disdain, the theologies implicit in these independent churches. The inclusion of members of OAIC as legitimate conversation partners in this conference where concerned African theologians wrestled with issues of justice in Africa, though rather belated, was indeed appropriate and necessary.

7 One of the twenty-two issues identified in the joint theological conference discussed here was the scourge of AIDS in Africa. The theologians made a pact to address this issue in a holistic and collaborative manner. It is noteworthy, for example, that the recognition of the imperative to work in solidarity with concerned others to address this particular issue has led the Circle to reschedule its third Pan-African Congress, originally scheduled for 2003. This rescheduling allows the women to participate in the recently launched World Council of Churches initiative to combat AIDS. The Circle meeting will now be held in August 2002 and will be an attempt by the women to unpack the multiple dimensions of this crisis and to flesh out their ethical, theological, and practical responses to it.
to be in solidarity with others, particularly other women in the global village who are similarly concerned with the nurturing of peace, health, and justice for all. They know that wholeness and dignity will come to this global village only when the multiple and intersecting evils of sexism, poverty, racism, classism, and violence become everyone's concern.

Sample Publications by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians


