

# Circle<sup>1</sup> Readings of the Bible/ Scriptoratures<sup>2</sup>

Musa W. Dube

## 1. Introduction: Circle Thinking, Talk and Acts

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth, The Circle) was launched in 1989. Evidently, the name 'Circle' was well thought for it captures a central aspect of most African philosophical thinking. Many African societies lay a great emphasis on interconnection, interdependence and continuity of life and relationships (in its great diversities) to the extent that even death does not break the circle of life<sup>3</sup> and in many places people identify themselves with animals as their sacred symbols<sup>4</sup>. The Circle

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Circle' refers to The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an academic association of African women in religion and theology.

<sup>2</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o uses the term 'orature' to refer to oral literatures of Africa. Here scriptature is coined to refer to African oral cultures as sacred and secular literature. Scriptorature can thus be used interchangeably with African oral cultures or to articulate the fact that African oral cultures constitute an authoritative body of literature in both the secular and the sacred spaces. This covers what is often referred to as African Religion/s.

<sup>3</sup> Among most African societies, it is believed that upon death one graduates into the community of the living dead. While in some societies rituals may be performed to help some individuals to become ancestors, it is generally held that life does not end with death.

<sup>4</sup> In Southern Africa most communities identify themselves with a certain animal, which they hold with respect. For example, I am a 'Dube' (Zebra), which means that I come from a community that identifies itself with a

perspective of life thus resists dualistic and hierarchical perspectives that often sanction exclusion and oppression. This circle perspective of life has led Ife Amadiume (1987:16f), an African Nigerian feminist sociologist of religion, to describe the gender relations of most African societies as characterised by 'flexibility in gender construction', rather than 'rigid gender ideology'<sup>5</sup>. With the current numerous crisis confronting the African continent, the emphasis on affirming a circle of life is central. One would not exaggerate to say the 'struggle to maintain life' in the continent goes beyond cultural thinking of black African people, rather, it cuts across black, white, Arabic, Asian and Latina Africans. The term 'circle' thus speaks of and to the concerns of our work as African women of various ethnic, race, age, class, religious and national backgrounds, living and studying various religions. As African women of The Circle we, therefore, do circle theology and interpret life-giving traditions found and used in the African continent from this perspective.

As an African woman biblical scholar from Botswana, 'The Circle' reminds me of two things: First, a game I used to play with other young girls. We would sit down in a circle with three-four stones. Then we would begin to sing a song while we pass the stones from one person to another. Round and round the stones would move in the circle with our song. It also reminds me of how as women, girls and children we would sit alone in *Lelwapa*<sup>6</sup>, around the fire after evening meals. Here we would either exchange proverbs, riddles, sayings and their meanings or Grandmother would tell stories, while we urge her on with our '*kolobetsa*' (continue to tell us) interjections. In the latter, the story was left to each listener to interpret its meaning, while the duty of the storyteller was to ensure that the story is well

---

Zebra. My community will not kill, eat or use Zebra meat or skins. Other people will be called *Ndlovu/Tlou* (Elephant), *Kgabo/Ncube* (Monkey) *Kwena/Ngwenya* (Crocodile), etc.

<sup>5</sup> For two other books of hers, see Amadiume *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture* (1997) and *Daughters of the Goddess: Daughters of Imperialism* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> The fireplace for men and boys are in separate areas, where they tell their own stories to each other. '*Lelwapa*' is an open space with a halfway built wall, where women sit in the evenings.

---

told to capture the imagination of listeners. No doubt, part of gender socialisation was carried out in this time. Yet these circles, at play and by the fireside, symbolised our space of friendship, sharing, solidarity, intellectual invigoration, bonding time and where every woman was given the chance to speak, think, listen and work. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is similar, yet distinguished by the fact that it seeks to be and works for being a transformative Circle. Here imperial histories of oppression and patriarchal spaces, roles, expectations, traditions, stories are spoken out and scrutinised for their oppressive perspectives. The transformative space of the Circle makes deliberate efforts to retell old stories and to tell new stories, proverbs, riddles, taboos and sayings to create visions of liberating interdependency.

I thus imagine The Circle for Concerned African Women theologians as a group of women sitting down in a circle, singing a song of life and liberation, while they pass the stones (the sacred and secular texts; the patriarchal and imperial texts and histories; written and oral texts) amongst themselves. I imagine them sitting down solving the riddles, proverbs, sayings or telling stories of various scriptures and cultures of their lives to each other, for each other and for articulating democratic visions of liberation. The Circle is thus as space where African women theologians examine the stones in their hands on how they endorse various forms of patriarchal and imperial powers and how they can be transformed from death dealing forces into life giving energy. The Circle is a space where we sit listening to each other as we share and create words of wisdom, around the warm and dangerous fire. The Circle, as an association thus symbolises our space of transformative power of re-interpretation; of our intellectual invigoration and creative energy; of our talking and of thinking amongst ourselves in a friendly and life affirming space, while we keep the *a luta continua* (the struggle continues) spirit of seeking and working out our resurrection from death dealing forces to relationships of liberating interdependency. For this rather challenging and exciting agenda, this paper seeks to highlight some of our activities within other histories and conversations of liberation biblical/scriptorature readers and seekers, namely:

## 1. Biblical/Scriptoratural and Black Biblical Interpretations

2. Cultural/Biblical Studies
3. Circle Cultural approaches to the Bible/Scriptoratures
4. Emerging African Women in Biblical-Scriptoratures Studies
5. Moving in Circles
6. Conclusion: Circle Biblical/ Scriptoratures Interpretative Practices

## 2. Biblical/Scriptoratural and Black Biblical Interpretations

Most black African biblical scholars of the last twenty years were trained in European schools and methods. Yet their scholarship departed from the methods of Western schools for they are not overly, if at all, focused on recovering 'the author's intended meaning' or attempting to undertake a neutral and disinterested interpretation, by focusing exclusively on ancient history of the Bible. Rather, African scholars undertook to read the Bible from African contexts and modern histories. They sought to read the Bible with their own African traditions, what I have termed sctoratures. Inculturation hermeneutics, as it has become commonly known, thus interprets the Bible with African traditions and histories to illuminate the meaning of the text in a communal life<sup>7</sup>. It concentrates on the African contexts, its cultures, current concerns and how male African sctoratures compare with the biblical. While inculturation hermeneutics of African scholars were not gender sensitive, they insists on reading the Bible with the African Sctoratures, that is, with other suppressed canons and with other histories, especially the history of modern imperialism<sup>8</sup>. It is on these grounds that the biblical western/feminist project of *Searching the Scriptures: Volume II*, while it motivated by gender-justice concerns to include exclude scriptures, became inadequate, for its focus on extra-biblical texts to the exclusion of the suppressed scriptures of the formerly colonised means that it is not a decolonising feminist project.

Several reasons prompted inculturation hermeneutics. First, it was an act of resistance against Western Christian imperialism, which had made

---

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough review of these African hermeneutical approaches see Martey's *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (1993).

<sup>8</sup> In so far as taking local contexts as the normative point of reference is concerned, African scholarship is similar to other Two-Thirds World scholars: moreover, it is theological.

a blanket dismissal of African cultures as barbaric and ungodly. Second, African Indigenous Churches (AICs) championed the hybridisation of biblical and African cultures from their inception in 1706, leading African academic scholars to follow suite with inculturation hermeneutics. Third, inculturation was, and is driven and maintained by the fact that African scriptoratures remain a life infusing force among African societies. On these grounds we can say inculturation was partly meant to resist imperialist presentation of colonial Christianity, which legitimised the suppression of African and other world cultures. But, above all, inculturation hermeneutics indicate the authority and use of African scriptoratures amongst its people. Inculturation hermeneutics, however, was marked by a wide range, from readers whose main concerns were evangelical and who worked within the colonial framework to radical ones (Ntloedibe 2001:97-121; 2001b:498-510), who insist/ed that African Scriptorature/s should be seen and studied in their own right<sup>9</sup>.

Black South African biblical scholarship, on the other hand, was largely informed by its context of apartheid, that is, the racial and economic oppression of black people. Race and class are very important categories of analysis in black South African biblical scholarship. Thus their biblical hermeneutics combined both black consciousness and Marxist theories in their reading. An excellent example of such hermeneutics is Mosala's *Black Biblical Hermeneutics and Black theology in South Africa*. Here, once again, it seems Black South African readers have always been alive, without attempting to wear the garment of disinterested reading, nor to exclusively focus on the ancient history as the only normative history for biblical interpretation. They have always read from their particular contexts and histories and with particular concerns of their social locations.

Although the bulk of African scholarship is still focusing on inculturation hermeneutics, a number of new methods are emerging. During the process of reading and editing numerous articles submitted for *The Bible in Africa*, I found that there are some scholars whose interpretations are focused on highlighting black presence in the Bible. Some were re-visiting the colonial translations of the Bible into local languages; some scholars sought to show how these translations served imperial agendas; some

---

<sup>9</sup> See also Banana's 'The Case For a New Bible' (1991).

employed postcolonial theories (see Dube 1996; 1997), and some sought to expound *Bosadi*, womanhood, hermeneutics<sup>10</sup>. A very important feature in the new methods of biblical interpretation is African women methods, which insist on the foregrounding of gender in biblical/scriptoratural and in histories of Africa and the text. We also have the approach of 'reading with', which is an act of asserting the validity of academically untrained readers<sup>11</sup>. The latter is very important to the African continent, where the majority of biblical readers are non-academic readers, and where biblical scholars are but handful individuals, trained in Western methods of thinking. Reading with non-academically trained readers becomes a subversive act of decolonising. When added to gendered economic means and educational training, women are even less likely to be trained biblical scholars. African women scholars thus 'read with' non-academic readers not only to stay in touch with their communities and to develop methods of reading that rise from their own communities but also to keep the voices of women readers heard. Reading with the non-academic readers breaks the academic class/privilege of knowledge production and takes into account the popular readers. In what follows, I will briefly explore the recent arrival of cultural studies in biblical studies, highlighting how, by and large, it has been what some African women have been advocating and doing, by focusing on Mercy Oduyoye's work.

### 3. Cultural/Biblical Studies

Inculturation and black biblical hermeneutics; asserting the validity of popular readers places the African biblical/scriptoratural scholarship together with one of the latest ways of reading the Bible; namely, cultural studies. Academic biblical interpretation now recognises that meaning is a

---

<sup>10</sup> See Masenya's 'Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for Reading for Liberation (Northern Sotho) Women', for further elaboration and application of *Bosadi* hermeneutics (1997:55-68).

<sup>11</sup> Quite a number of scholars have already recommended or applied this approach. See Oduyoye (1993: 45-55); Amoah (1995:1). The latest work on reading with non-academic works is represented by Gerald West and M.W. Dube's *Reading With* (1996); and Kanyoro's *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (2002).

product of the:

- a) text (with its social location);
- b) reader (with her/his social location);
- c) method(s) of reading the text - with its assumptions and questions;
- d) ethics, risks, and responsibilities of reading;

The studying of the text and the reader's social location and methods of reading has moved biblical studies from neutral or high class exegesis, to what is sometimes called cultural studies. According to Fernando Segovia (1995:29) cultural studies is a 'joint critical study of texts and readers, perspectives and ideologies'. Segovia (1995:29) holds that in cultural studies we have a

Flesh-and-blood reader: always positioned and interested; socially and historically conditioned and unable to transcend such conditions to attain a sort of asocial and ahistorical nirvana- not only with respect to socio-economic class but also with regard to the many other factors that make up human identity.

Cultural studies are/is only beginning to infiltrate biblical studies in the Western academic halls as a distinct approach. A substantial volume, consisting of various articles by different contributors, has recently come out from the Sheffield Academic press, entitled *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies*. The introductory chapter describes the approach as 'concerned with the Bible as culture and the Bible in culture, ancient and modern' (Exum & Moore 1998:34). It describes cultural studies as investigating

Not just the Bible influencing culture or culture re-appropriating the Bible, but a process of unceasing mutual redefinition in which cultural appropriations constantly re-invent the Bible, which in turn constantly impels new appropriations, and biblical scholars find themselves... hunting video stores, museums, and other sites of cultural productions (Exum & Moore 1998:35).

They hold that biblical/cultural studies recognises 'the Bible's status as a cultural icon' and it also focuses on ideology (Exum & Moore 1998:35). As

---

Circle readers, we may ask two questions concerning biblical cultural studies; namely,

- Does biblical/cultural studies resonate with our African inculturation/cultural hermeneutics?<sup>12</sup>
- How can cultural studies further inform our practice?

As described by Segovia, African biblical interpretation termed inculturation hermeneutics (even the South African black biblical hermeneutics) have always been 'positioned and interested, socially and historically conditioned'. Since inculturation hermeneutics resisted any detached reading that solely focused on ancient Greco-Roman setting and biblical texts, but chose to also focus on African contexts, histories of subjugation, concerns, cultures and the Bible (see the above pages) it was driven by the facts of their contexts, their identity, their history of colonial suppression, insistence on liberation and the right to life. African readers, in other words, could not read the Bible without their scripturatures, since this would amount to endorsing their own colonisation of the mind and denying their own identity. And given that mainstream biblical studies is largely Western in its thinking and its methods, Most African biblical scholars could not read the Bible without their popular readers and perspectives since this would also amount to the same thing.

Yet because of their cultural approach, black African interpretative practices have not been recognised, engaged or accepted by mainstream biblical studies, which was/is largely historical critical/high class in its practices. The current cultural studies approach in biblical studies, however, helps us to realise that Two-Thirds World readings were unaccepted, because biblical studies was a largely colonizing and high class practice, which upheld the interests of mainstream First World readers as the only standard and correct interpretation of the Bible. Biblical studies was largely

---

<sup>12</sup> Cultural hermeneutics is a term employed by Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro to describe inculturation hermeneutics that adds gender and feminist concerns, but which also reads within the community, underlining that ultimately change must happen in and with the community. See her book, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, referred to earlier.

---



high-class activity of the 'Western degreed persons' one which ignored the various popular readings of the Bible and the scholars who openly read with non-academic readers. Also, biblical scholarship itself worked within the larger unequal international power relations, where the Western world regards Two-Thirds World countries as the consumers of its goods and ideas. If the current movement of biblical studies into cultural studies in Western halls is anything to go by, then it calls First World readers to recognise and dialogue with African and Two-Thirds World biblical interpretations more seriously, for the latter have always been involved in biblical/cultural studies approach. The act of ignoring and excluding Two-Thirds World's work will be hard to justify from now onwards, save if the mainstream biblical studies wishes to maintain, consciously or unconsciously, its high class and imperial biblical hermeneutics as the only acceptable interpretation.

When we turn to Exum and Moore (who define biblical/cultural studies as an approach that examines 'the Bible as culture and the Bible in culture, (in) ancient and modern' times) and ask whether the approach resonates with African women/men biblical-Scriptoratural practices, one is bound to answer yes. The frame of inculturation hermeneutics has been concerned with studying the Bible, as and in, contemporary African culture, but not exclusively focusing on ancient Greco-Roman culture. It is notable that Exum and Moore site Itumeleng J. Mosala's article, 'Race, Class and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in African Independent Churches' appropriation of the Bible', of *Semeia* 73 (1996) 'as the first biblical scholar to draw on the work the Birmingham school', which pioneered cultural studies by an approach of studying popular cultures. Insofar as Mosala was studying a popular use of the Bible (and using a Marxist perspective to analyse it), he was tapping on a very well established inculturation hermeneutic of Sub-Saharanans. The very international status and culture of the African continent, in many ways, dictated a cultural studies approach to the Bible. That is, in a setting where commentary and interpretation is mostly expressed in popular song, sculpture<sup>13</sup>, poems, drama, and painting

---

<sup>13</sup> See West (1993:54-61) where he focuses 'African Critical Resources for Reading', by analysing an interpretation of the story of Joseph by Azaiah Mbatha.

---

by popular groups rather than by groomed middle-class intellectuals, African intellectuals could either choose to align themselves with high class biblical interpretations of their Western schools or listen to their own communities and popular/low class interpretations of their contexts. It was the latter that was adopted to the extent that African inculturation scholars were, more often than not, artists of fusing the Bible and their own cultures. But here they were following on the path of hybridisation championed by African Independent Churches.

#### 4. Circle Cultural Approaches to the Bible/Scriptoratures

Some good examples of cultural biblical interpretations are found in Mercy Oduyoye and my work. In her chapter on 'Expressions, Sources, and Variants of African Theology', she writes that

Africans were trying to clarify and interpret for themselves the significance of .... Stories about Jesus and stories told by him. Just as they transmitted history orally, Africans retold these stories, elaborating them and drawing out what struck them as particularly relevant and enduring .... Africans sang to interpret biblical events (Oduyoye 1993: 45).

Oduyoye then proceeds to analyse African biblical songs for their interpretations<sup>14</sup>. The focus on towards popular interpretation and uses of the Bible is also underlined in Oduyoye article, 'Biblical Interpretation and Social Location of the Interpreter: African Women's Reading of the Bible' (Oduyoye 1995: 33 - 51).

The Bible has a special place in the hearts and homes of African Christians. The question is, how is it used? A couple of stories will suffice .... I arrived at my sister's house and saw an open Bible in the

---

<sup>14</sup> In fact, when we turn to the cultural archive of songs and as a body, biblical interpretation, then we find that African American scholarship has been analysing their spirituals for a while now. James Cone in his *Black Theology*, utilized this body of cultural productions. See also Hope Cain Felder's *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*.

cot of her newborn babe. 'You have left your Bible here', I called. 'No, it is deliberate; it will keep away evil influences'. I was dumbfounded: the daughter of a Methodist pastor with a doctorate... earned in a reputable US university, using the Bible as a talisman! When I told this story in the course of social occasion in Nigeria, a discussion ensued that revealed many more such uses of the Bible: Christian lawyers who keep a Bible on every shelf of their library; house built with Bibles buried in their foundations and individuals buried with Bibles in their coffins; Bibles in cars that may never be read, but whose presence proves comforting, a sort of Immanuel, or God-with-us (Oduyoye 1995: 34).

Oduyoye calls upon African academic scholars to bear in mind these stories, 'when attempting to communicate their scholarly readings of the Bible' (Oduyoye 1995: 34). Needless to say, the task that Oduyoye puts to us, who are mostly trained in western-ways of reading, is daunting! That Oduyoye's look into the Bible in and as culture is indeed driven by her context, gender and class of her people is openly articulated as she says,

The story of 'the Bible in the Cot' should be taken together with the story of the Bible that is sung. The first women to appropriate the Bible in Africa heard it read and its stories retold. They met God in the narrative and transmitted their testimonies in 'poetic theology', singing, praying and commenting on biblical events. These women, mostly farmers, traders, often marketing their own produce and products-also had crucial responsibilities in their families and larger communities. There were women with not a minute to spare ... (Oduyoye 1995: 39).

A cultural/biblical studies approach in my work reflects two concerns. First, how the Bible was brought to colonised subjects and how that may affect the way we read the Bible. My focus highlights the Bible as journeying in histories and cultures of different readers. Thus in my article, 'Towards a post-colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible', in *Semeia* 78, I have began by relating how colonial paintings of biblical stories have had a great impact on how I read biblical stories. Because before I began to read the

Bible, I often saw paintings that depicted Jesus, Mary and the disciples as white blue eyed and blond people and the devil often as a black man, it affected my reading of biblical stories. That is, I read all God-fearing characters as white people and those who resisted complying with godly ways as black Africans and other non-Christian nations. This experience speaks of the colonisation of my mind and many other colonised subjects, whose first contact with the Bible was illustrated through colonially informed paintings. This self-realisation for postcolonial subjects is a must. It calls upon the formerly colonised subjects to re-examine their categories of reading and how they are colonially informed either towards resistance, collaboration and revolutionary resistance. It also calls upon the colonised subject to make deliberate efforts to interrogate their colonially framed reading practices.

Second, cultural/biblical studies approach has been dictated to me by my Two-thirds World status of an African woman of Botswana background. Because I am conscious and suspicious that I am trained in Western ways of reading the bible, I have often made efforts to get connected to Batswana ways of reading the Bible/Scritoratures. This landed me amongst African Independent churches (AICs) community of readers (see Dube 1996: 11-26). Of course, as compared to my academic halls interpretations and communities of readers, these pass as popular readers and popular readings of the Bible. As a liberation reader, I also sought them out primarily because of their history of resistance; the prevalence of women leaders. The attempt to be connected with my own community of readers is a decolonising act. As I followed up AICs non-trained and non-academic readers, one of the major things I found was that the Bible was read as a divining text. It is used to divine the problems of sick patients and to recommend solutions. This was ground breaking for me. What was even more ground breaking was to find out how subversive this reading is. That is, while I found that colonial translators of Setswana Bible had translated 'demon' and 'evil spirits' as *Badimo* (Setswana Ancestral Spirits) (see 1999: 7-33), the AICs readers, however, refused to succumb to this colonially informed translation, by using the Bible to divine consulting patients. That is, they read the Bible as a divining set that allows them to get in touch with their sacred figures-*Badimo* and Jesus. In this way, they maintained the sacred role of *Badimo* as caretakers of the society against all forms of ills; against colonially

derogative translations. Through my interaction with popular readers of African Independent Churches, I have ever since tried to understand Setswana divination practices and how they can be used as a methods of reading texts and life. My efforts to use divination as a method of reading biblical/cultural texts and life are now available as published articles (see Dube 1999:67-80; 2001: 179-198).

The second question is, how can cultural studies inform and enrich our practice as African women of the Circle? The above examples speak for themselves. Since most African communities are oral societies, and since commentary about life/texts is mostly found in songs, paintings, cultures, poems, rituals, etc. cultural productions are bound to provide us with new critical questions and insights to read biblical/scriptoratural texts, especially those that arise from resistance contexts. Also because while women are more less likely be trained in academic biblical studies, they are more likely to be found amongst popular songwriters and singers. Two examples, one from a black female singer and another from a black male artist, will suffice to illustrate the point.

I was recently struck by Miriam Makeba's song, '*Aluta Continua*', where she sings, 'FRELIMO, FRELIMO your eternal flame has shown us the light of God'<sup>15</sup>. This is obviously a dramatic reinterpretation of the Bible that places salvation and divine light not where we expect to find it (Jesus, the biblical tradition, or church), but within the midst of African liberation movements (FRELIMO). Recently, I also heard a story in Cape Town about a black boy who made a black painting of Jesus in the 1960s. The painting caused a row and trouble for the boy and his family from the apartheid regime. The boy and his painting were forced to disappear until recently in the post-apartheid era. The question is, why did a black painting of Jesus strike panic to the apartheid authorities? Obviously, apartheid was grounded on an ideology of white supremacy, supported by some biblical interpretations. In such a historical setting, the image of the divine was presented as a white blond Jesus and the devil was a black male. Such images were an important part of propounding and maintaining the ideology of apartheid and white supremacy. But the other painting dared to say black is also divine, thus exposing the ideology of apartheid to be a white

---

<sup>15</sup> See/ listen to *Urban Africa Jive of the Townships*.

construction of the Bible that cannot be equated with facts<sup>16</sup>. More importantly, it exposed Jesus' racial identity as a product/construct of different readers and for various political ends. His black Jesus became a critical attack on apartheid hence an immediate response was necessary to contain its revolutionary potential. Both the black and white Jesus art works provide insights on how interpretations happen, work; how they get legitimised or suppressed. They call for a new look at our texts; highlight the role of a situated real reader of flesh blood and they provide new frameworks than the conventionally accepted methods of reading. They also highlight the centrality of power relations concerning which and whose interpretations come to be accepted. If African women (and men) scholars of the Bible/scriptoratures listen to their resistance and liberation artists and explore their works, I believe there should be a good harvest of new insights to highlight on texts, reading and histories of resistance. But then the aspect of power in the world and academic hierarchy of knowledge remains an issue to contend with as to whose interpretations will be heard and engaged. Further, the appropriation of popular readings will require an ethical framework of liberation of all people to be foregrounded, for it will be folly to think that popular readers are equal to liberation readers.

## 5. Emerging African Women in Biblical-Scriptoratures Studies

With the gendered history of academic biblical training, there are very few academically trained African women scholars. Teresa Okure was a lone voice for a while. Okure wrote her dissertation on *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A contextual Study of John 4:1-42*. Okure's interest in mission

---

<sup>16</sup> I once took my son to the Upper Room museum, in Scarritt Bennett Centre, Nashville, Tennessee. The museum was full of Christian art, all of it portrayed as white people. We went around admiring the art works and suddenly we came to this one painting of a black Jesus. It was written, 'black Jesus blesses children.' I did not say a word to my son as we admired it and passed on to other pieces of art. After we left, I heard my son say repeatedly, 'Black Jesus blesses children! Black Jesus Bless Children!' I knew that he liked the picture, for out of a very white art about divine characters, he found out that Jesus could be black and bless children for that matter!

continues as attested by her recent volume, *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth*, published by Cluster. In the latter, Okure propounds one of her exciting feminist visions of liberation, through what she calls hermeneutics of life. The latter holds that every reader and reading of the Bible should only proceed, *if and only*, it supports the advancement and respect for all life. Obviously, this stand point carries one of the most powerful liberation vision if carried out, for it makes no room for any form of oppression in the process of reading and interpretation and calls for the respect, not only of all people, but also life as a whole in our interpretative projects. Okure has significantly contributed to inculturation biblical hermeneutic (see Okure et al. 1990) African feminist and international forums of feminism (see Okure 1993:76-85). Her articles also appeared in volumes that dealt with social location and with recent feminist trends (see Okure 1995:52-66).

In the past eight years a number of other academically trained African women biblical scholars have begun to emerge. Some have just completed their PhD some are just about to finish. To list a few names of those I know: we have Mmadipoane Masenya in South Africa and Dora Mbuwayesango from Zimbabwe who are both Hebrew Bible scholars. Masenya's dissertation was a Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: *A Bosadi* (womanhood Perspective while Mbuwayesango's PhD dissertation was on *The Defence of Zion and the House of David: Isaiah 36-39 in the Context of Isaiah 1-39*. For the New Testament, Elna Mouton, a white South African and Musa W. Dube from Botswana have already completed their studies in the New Testament. Mouton's dissertation was on *Reading a New Testament document Ethically: Toward an Accountable Use of Scripture in Christian Ethics, Through Analysing the Transformative Potential of the Ephesians Epistle*. Dube wrote her dissertation on *Towards a Post-colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Sarojini Nadar, a South African Indian woman has just completed her dissertation on the Hebrew Bible. The title of Nadar's dissertation is *Power, Ideology and Interpretation: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation*. Grace R.K. Imathiu from Kenya and Alice Laffe from Cameroon are still working on their PhDs in the New Testament while Makhosi Ndzimande from Durban Africa is completing her PhD in Hebrew Bible.

Despite the lack of trained African women biblical scholars, there has always been vibrant African biblical interpretations at the academic and non-academic levels. Many women theologians have given us a number of biblical interpretations (as attested by Mercy Oduyoye's work above). African women, like their male counterparts biblical readers took their particular contexts, scriptures and histories of colonial resistance as normative. Perhaps this is best expressed by Mercy Oduyoye when she says, 'the Bible has become part of received wisdom' (Oduyoye 1995:36). The latter (received wisdom) is characterised by the 'critical affirmation' of African scriptures as opposed to the blanket dismissal of colonial times. This strategy of imperial and patriarchal resistance is underlined by Mercy A. Oduyoye who maintains that for African women, 'scriptures are not limited to Christian sources (but) include the language of oracles, prayers, symbols, rites of African's combined religion and culture' and underlines that 'as we (African women) reread the Bible, we do not overlook the need to review the traditional interpretations of Africans own spiritual sources (Oduyoye 1996:113). A distinct feature, from black male inculturist and black hermeneutical readers, is that African women foreground a gender critique and feminist construction to both the traditions (Oduyoye 1993). They read against their multiple oppressions: against imperial and patriarchal marginalisation, paying attention on how it works with race, class, age, health status, ethnic and sexual discrimination. The wider/western feminist biblical scholarship that seeks to recognise the struggles of Two-Thirds World women against imperialism and patriarchy should be transgressing the boundaries of imperial domination, exclusion and suppression of Other World scriptures, readers and histories of interpretation.

## **6. Moving in Circles**

Our way forward as The Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians in the area of biblical/Scriptures interpretation will not only depend on training more women, but also in compiling the Scriptures and developing our own ways of knowing and articulating visions of liberation. To begin with the first, if African women and men acknowledge scriptures as an authoritative canon, then I recommend that The Circle should call upon women from various regions and countries to compile these



stories, proverbs, sayings, teachings, taboos, rituals, songs, prayers, etc under a title such as African Words of Wisdom and Life or simply Scriptoratures. It would be a wonderful, unique and challenging opportunity for African women to be involved in compiling an unclosed and liberating canon for their communities, countries and continent. While I know that African people are an oral people, who enjoy their non-literate ways of life, nevertheless, I think The Circle must compile African scriptoratures under an open and liberating canonical collection. The compilation would allow those who need to get in dialogue with African scriptoratures to have some point of reference. Such a compilation would also allow for some form of preservation. In this fast changing world, we cannot claim that the social structures that ensured the preservation of oral traditions are still in place.

Second, it is important that African women (and men) should develop their own ways of knowing and articulating visions of liberating interdependence. Most African scholars are trained in biblical methods of the West, regardless of whether they trained in Western schools or not—this is because biblical methods of reading have been transported and marketed to all areas of the world as ‘the legitimate ways of reading the Bible’. Depending on the schools or seminaries of their training, they may be historical, literary, socio-scientific critics or a combination of these. Yet it is evident that, like their male counterparts, most African women scholars have developed their own methods of reading as attested by the rise of inculturation. This trend must continue, for the masters’ tools cannot bring down his house. Some notable African women’s methods to be tapped are *Bosadi/Womanhood*, ‘reading with’ popular readers, postcolonial and the hermeneutic of life. African women should continue to problematize and develop their theories of reading. Yet I would also recommend that The Circle should continue to draw from African ways of knowing to read their scriptoratures, the Bible, the Koran and other existing canons of life for visions of liberating interdependence. Some of the methods and concepts that I believe need to be explored further for interpretations are:

1. telling and re-telling stories (Dube 2001:40-65);
2. divination as readings (Dube 1999);
3. spirit readings (Dube 1993; see also Njoroge 2001);
4. poetic interpretations (Oduyoye 1998: 61-72);

5. reading for healing (Oduyoye 1996: 114);
6. proverbial interpretations, etc.

These perspectives are ancient skills of thinking, knowing and speaking within many African communities and they deserve further employment and engagement in reading the Bible/Scriptoratures. Gladly The Circle has begun to explore, develop these as methods that can illuminate the texts for their histories of oppression as well unveil some democratic visions of liberation. The Circle has recently published *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, a volume that has begun to explore and apply some of the above methods. The volume carries some examples of the application of storytelling, divination and poetic interpretations. A good example is represented by the two story-telling perspectives. While they both use stories from ancient sctoratures, 'Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Feminist Storytelling of Mark 5:24-43' also tells the contemporary story of Africa, by highlighting its effects on Southern African women. The latter is a good example of how Bible/sctorature/s are read within various histories of texts, than the practice of singling out the ancient history as the only normative history for biblical interpretation. Madipoane Masenya's reading of Esther within and with Sotho stories is a good example of reading biblical/sctorature/s for liberation and gives them equal normative status. Musimbi Kanyoro propounds an 'engendered inculturation' hermeneutic, which she calls cultural hermeneutics. Gloria Plaatjie's chapter is based on 'reading with' non-academics women readers in search of subversive feminist strategies. Of note in Plaatjie's article is that she calls for the reading of the new South African constitution as a sacred text.

*Other Ways of Reading* also continues the wider discourse of feminists that problematised patriarchal biblical language and called for inclusive Biblical translations. The articles of Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani and Dora Mbuwayesango thus interrogate how the patriarchy and imperialism of translators collaborated with that of the biblical text to suppress the gender-neutral understanding of the Divine within most African societies. Such translations, they argue, marginalize women from social positions of power and further distort the image of African Religion/s. They make suggestions as to what would constitute gender-neutral translations of the Bible that respect gender-neutral understanding of the Divine. The

volume *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, is undoubtedly a major contribution to the African and worldwide scholarship.

With the HIV&AIDS epidemic wrecking havoc on African communities; with its particular impact on women and its link with social injustice, The Circle has turned its attention to reading for healing. In 2001, A Pan-African Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Meeting was convened in Addis Abba, focusing on religion and HIV&AIDS as well as seeking ways of articulating and working for healing. Circle ways of re-reading the Bible/Scriptoratures in the light of HI&AIDS are already available in the volume that I edited, *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in theological programs*, published by WCC, 2003. However a fuller perspective will soon be available in a forthcoming volume *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible*, which will be published by both Cluster and Orbis publishing houses. A total number of seven books, focusing on HIV&AIDS and from various religions and disciples are in the process of being produced and regional follow up meetings are also on the agenda. HIV&AIDS' attack on life, its gendered features and its link with injustice is a great challenge to the work of The Circle.

## **7. *A luta Continua* Conclusion: Circle Biblical/ Scriptoratures' Interpretative Practices**

Circle interpretative practises, therefore, are infused with the spirit of *a luta continua*<sup>17</sup> (a continuing/determined struggle) to live and the will to arise (see Dube 1998) against all forms that continue to hinder the fulfilment of qualitative life. This spirit of *a luta continua* strives for the fullness of life in the midst of our, communities and the world that is part of us. The phrase *a luta continua* became a popular language of the struggle for liberation during the years of fighting for independence in Africa. It expressed the determination of various African nations to keep on struggling for their liberation despite the power of their oppressors. It is thus used here to evoke that spirit of refusing to give up, regardless of the size and power of the

---

<sup>17</sup> *A luta continua* is a Portuguese phrase, that was used as a slogan for mobilising masses of resistance.

---

enemy and oppression. It expresses our unwavering determination to seek to experience the fulfilment of life. *A luta continua* is also used here to follow on Miriam Makeba's song<sup>18</sup> that places salvation and the light of God within our struggles for liberation in Africa, as discussed earlier. Our work as Circle interpreters should be firmly placed within frameworks of the struggle for liberation in Africa and the world. This is where God's salvation is worked out in our lives and the world.

The phrase 'the will to arise', has indeed become popular and representative of the work of The Circle as attested by the title of books and articles derived from this phrase. The phrase is indeed drawn from the story of Jesus bringing a dead little girl back to life (Mark 5:21-42). But as used here and by African women of The Circle, it does not suggest that we are waiting for a male figure to work out our liberation – to awake us to life or some kind of prince charming to kiss us to life!! Rather, the call to arise into life, *talitha cum*, is now pronounced and worked out by African women of The Circle themselves in partnership with other liberation seekers/readers and with the Divine Powers. For this re-interpretation see my paper, 'Fifty Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Perspective of Mark 5:21-35' (Dube 1998). Here a bleeding woman called Africa calls, '*talitha cum*', to her buried children and people. They all resurrect and come back to life, but, then, that is when the real *a luta continua* begins. For The Circle, 'the will to arise' thus describes our willingness to be partners with God in the struggle to build the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The ethics of The Circle thinking, talk and acts are as articulated in its name: The Circle of *Concerned* African Women Theologians. Their interpretative acts are characterised by a '*concern*' to promote all that affirms justice and life in its fullness. It is concern to respect the humanity of all, even as it foregrounds its struggles against patriarchy and imperialism. This concern is driven by an act of *a luta continua*, a continuous/determined resistance against the numerous crisis confronting us and it is spirited by 'the will to arise' from the debris of death dealing forces into life-affirming

---

<sup>18</sup> It is indeed proper that we should pay heed to the singing of Miriam Makeba for she has been named 'Mama Africa', for embodying the wounds and the struggles of Africa, in the many years that she spent in exile and singing for the liberation of her country and Africa as a whole.

liberation and the realisation of the fullness of life for women, as well as to stand continuously against all those structures and ideologies that deny the affirmation of all persons regardless of their race, gender, nationality, religiosity, age, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, health and international status. At the centre and peripheries of 'circle interpretations', therefore, is a stubborn insistence of affirming the dignity of life against all forms of oppressive systems and their ideologies. Evidently, The Circle's concern takes a particular focus on women's lives, while it does not ignore other oppressed persons and categories of oppression.

Department of Religious Studies  
Scripps College

## References

- Amadiume, Ifi 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.
- Amadiume, Ifi 1997. *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture*. London: Zed Books
- Amadiume, Ifi 2000. *Daughters of the Goddess Daughters of Imperialism*. London: Zed Books.
- Amoah, Elizabeth 1995. Theology From a Perspective of African Women. In Ortega, O (ed): *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, and Action*. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Banana, Canaan 1991. The Case For a New Bible. In Sugirtharajah, RS (ed): *Voices From The Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Orbis Press.
- Dube, Musa W 1996. Reading for Decolonization: John 4:1-42. *Semeia* 75: 26-52.
- Dube, Musa W 1996. Readings of *Semoya: Batswana Women Interpretations of the Bible*. In *Semeia* 73:11-26. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Dube, Musa W 1997. Toward Post-colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. *Semeia* 78: 11-26.
- Dube, Musa W 1998. Fifty Years of Bleeding. The paper was first written for and at WCC 50<sup>th</sup> Assembly, United Bible Societies (UBS) section, Harare. It was first published in *The Ecumenical Review* 51,1,:11-17.

- Dube Musa W 1999. Divining the Text for International Relations: Matt 15:21-28. In Kirtzberger, Ingrid (ed): *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Reviewed*. Leiden: Brill
- Dube, Musa W 1999. Consuming the Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into Demons. *JNST* 73: 7-33.
- Dube, MW 2001. Divining Ruth For International Relations. In Dube, MW (ed): *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: SBL.
- Dube, Musa W 2001. Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters. In Njoroge Nyambura (ed): *Talitha Cum, Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Exum, Cheryl J & Stephen D Moore (eds) 1998. *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Felder, Hope Cain (ed) 1991. *Stony the Road we Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Kanyoro, Musimbi 2002. *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Martey, Emmanuel 1993. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Masenya, M 1997. Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African Context: A Reading for Reading for Liberation (Northern Sotho) Women. *Semeia* 78: 55-68.
- Njoroge, N 2001. The Bible and African Christianity: A Curse or Blessing? In Dube, Musa W (ed): *Other Ways*. Atlanta: SBL, 2001.
- Oduyoye, MA 1993. *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*. New York: Orbis Press.
- Oduyoye, MA 1995. Biblical Interpretation and the Social Location of an Interpreter: African Women's Reading of the Bible. In Segovia, FF & MA Tolbert (eds): *Reading From This Place, 2*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba 1996. A Feminist Theology, African. In Russell, Letty & J Shannon Clarkson (eds): *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Louisville: Westminster.
- Oduyoye, Mercy A (ed) 1998. *AMKA: An Occasional Newsletter of the Biennial Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture*. Issue 4A. Accra: Sam Woode.

- Okure, Teresa et al. 1990. *Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*. Eldoret: AMACEA Publications.
- Okure, Teresa 1993. Feminist Interpretations in Africa. In Schüssler Fiorenza, E (ed): *Searching the Scriptures Volume 1: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Crossroad.
- Okure, Teresa 1995. Reading from this Place: Some Problems and Prospects. In Segovia, Fernando F & MA Tolbert (eds): *Reading From This Place 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Urban Africa Jive of the Townships*. A Polygram International compilation, Publishing information not stated.
- West, Gerald 1993. *Contextual Bible Study*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications
- West, Gerald & Dube, MW 1996. *Reading With. Semeia 73*. Atlanta: SBL, Scholars Press.