

# Editorial: Empire Religions, Theologies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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This special issue of *Alternation* consists of thirteen selected, peer reviewed and approved articles from an interdisciplinary International Summer School Conference on ‘Empire Religions, Theologies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems’, held at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics of the University of KwaZulu–Natal in 2014. The Summer School was hosted in collaboration with Humboldt University (Berlin, Germany). The aim was to create an interdisciplinary dialogue platform for academics, researchers and postgraduate students within the Humanities from Germany and South Africa. The particular focus was to examine issues ranging from the relationship between indigenous knowledge systems and modernity, postcolonial identity, religion and ethics in the context of globalization with special interest on religious pluralism and the common responsibility for the world. This was perceived as significant in understanding various configurations and intersectionalities among notions of knowledge, power, and religion.

The underlying argument of the articles is that since the times of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, religion and religious symbols have been used repeatedly to legitimate the political and military power of Empires. In close connection to this, the Empires of Antiquity were the first ones to form elites of knowledge and to produce written knowledge - partly also with religious connotations. Elsewhere Chammah Kaunda (2015) has argued that during the period of modern colonialism, Christian religion and its theology was an overarching frame of knowledge for European missionaries in Africa. The missionary theological politics of knowledge was used as an instrument for conquest and subjugation of indigenous knowledge, identities and subjectivities in Africa. Therefore what in the theories of Michel Foucault (1972) is called the ‘Archaeology of knowledge’, partly is a religious

institution. This configuration endures to colonial and post-colonial times. Distinct from the archives of imperial power, there are other knowledge systems like those handed down by communities of descent, by groups or schools of religious experts or by alternative networks of the poor and the powerless. In African and other indigenous communities around the world such knowledge is classified in its academic usage as ‘indigenous knowledge’. It is perceived to be the worldviews of indigenous people and people with African ancestry and are claimed to be an ‘epistemology of struggle’ which aims at decentring ‘Eurocentrism’ which rejects the possibility of meaningful scientific knowledge to be found elsewhere rather than Europe. In a way indigenous knowledge critiques the universalization of Eurocentric norms, the idea that any race, in Aimé Césaire’s words, ‘holds a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength’ (cited in Shohat & Stam 2014/1994:3). The approach of indigenous knowledge is ‘experientially-based, non-universal, holistic and relational knowledge of ‘resistance’’, recognition of their legitimacy is associated with the politics of decolonizing the mind, gender, identities and subjectivities and institutions of knowledge production such as colleges and universities (Dei 2002:114). This is about more than challenging and subverting ‘epistemological imperialism’. George Sefa Dei (2012:104) asks a poignant question: ‘How do we African scholars stop ourselves from becoming ‘intellectual imposters’ in the Western academy?’ The answer to this sobering question lies in consciously and decisively grounding African knowledge production, and practices into their appropriate soils, cultural contexts, histories and heritages. That is, in addition to resisting colonial education and knowledges, it is important to work, learn, and engage in knowledge production, sharing and critical inquiry in contexts that affirm or are suitable given the histories, heritages and cultures that shape our ways of understanding the world (Dei 2012:104-105).

In a way, the articles in this issue engage in building on literature that is exploring fresh approaches in an endeavour to exercise intellectual agencies rooted in assertion of indigenous social reality informed by local experiences and practices.

The content of the articles are situated with a range of academic disciplines, especially within the Humanities – such African Theology, Religion and Politics, Sociology, Philosophy, Gender and Religion, Ethics, Education, Cultural, Gender, Drama and Performance Studies. These articles are approached from interdisciplinary perspectives. This special issue is

divided into four sections beginning with the religion against empire, followed by theology and indigenous knowledge, then the question of identity in post-apartheid South Africa and finally there are specific articles that focus on biographies of distinguished personalities of either African ancestry or association.

In his provocative article 'Christianity in Africa', Anthony Balcomb argues that 'Christian religion has become deeply insinuated into the world view of many Africans south of the Sahara'. Employing Bourdieu's theory of habitus, Balcomb notes that depending on the paradigm used, Christianity in African can be seen as either liberating or culturally alienating. In the first sector is the conquest model used mostly by African elites, who see Christianity as colonial instrument used to subjugate Africans to European domination. This resulted in the foreignization and alienation of Christianity as religion of colonizers. The second is liberation paradigm which promotes African identities and subjectivities. He accentuates that more than 'a set of abstract criteria' alone, Africans prefer using stories to interpret Christian faith in concrete social realities.

The next four articles focus on indigenous knowledge systems and begins with an article by Chammah J. Kaunda which examines the validity of the assertion that has been popular among African elites that homosexuality is 'un-Africa'. Chammah J. Kaunda evaluates the literature of the early cultural anthropologists among the Ndembu people and other related ethics groups in Zambia and demonstrates that 'the current politicization of homosexuality as 'un-African' in Zambia is a by-product of African epistemic failure to articulate cultural sexualities within the ideological and material legacies of African cultural past'. He argues that homosexuality was a ritual sexuality that existed in the liminal stage of the ritual of circumcision among the Ndembus and had specific cultural function in the overall scheme of the ritual. He proposes 'an African ecclesia-ethic of openness' based on unconditional love.

The article by Beatrice Okyere-Manu, 'Cohabitation in Akan Culture of Ghana', takes an ethical investigation on the current issue of cohabitation in Akan culture of Ghana. Using consequentialism theory Okyere-Manu discovers the Akan traditional culture has mechanisms that minimises 'the unity and the rituals that binds and protects the individuals in the relationship' and simultaneously restrains 'the essence of the institution of marriage within the indigenous Akan context'. She therefore argues for critical reclaiming and

reconstituting some Akan cultural elements on marriage to strengthen the current social system.

Articles of Lilian Siwila and Christina Kgari-Masondo pick up in more detail the implications of indigenous knowledge system in the area of gender, maternal health and environmental issues. In different ways they both argue for more dialogue between contemporary knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems in order to recover the notion of the community. Siwila explores 'The role of indigenous Knowledge in African Women's Theology for understanding motherhood and maternal health' within the African context. This research is significant especially in the context where issues of maternal and infant mortality rates are high on agenda of many African countries. Through the lens of liminality, Siwila articulates the process from conception to childbirth as a rite of passage and shows how the community participates in the process by providing support to the mother and child.

Kgari-Masondo looks at the role the Sotho-Tswana women in environmental issues. She analyses women who were forcedly removed in the 1960s from their ancestral land in Lady Selborne, South Africa and resettled in Ga-Rankuwa. She argues that the task of food production and land guardianship was a sacred duty of Sotho-Tswana women and displacement interrupted this function as they lost their fertile lands and relocated in barren and arid land. Kgari-Masondo suggests reclamation of the sacred role of women as guardians of environment and food producers by involving different stakeholders such as the state, communities and non-governmental organisations to engaged Sotho-Tswana women in alternative ways of interacting with the environment by combining both contemporary and indigenous approaches.

The next three articles deal with the question of identity within postcolonial perspectives. In the first article, Sokfa, Kaunda and Madlala engage with young people's contestations of the notion 'Born Free' identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors analyse stage play-script called *Mzansi* stories written and performed by students in the Drama and Performance Studies of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. They demonstrate that stage play such as *Mzansi* stories have potential to enable the wider society to understand various ways in which post-apartheid young generation is contesting, deconstructing and reconstructing the 'Born Free identity in protest to prevailing socio-political circumstances within South Africa'.

In 'The black body in colonial and postcolonial public discourse in

South Africa', Federico Settler and Mari Engh interrogate 'the representation of the black body, and the ways these representations have been sustained by social discourses that imagine black bodies as fixed and without agency'. The authors note that current discourses and epistemologies that form the representation of black body in postcolonial [South] Africa remain entrenched in Eurocentric epistemology and colonial representation in which the black body remains essentially a space 'of labour, violence and disease'. In analysing and exposing these representations, Settler and Engh intended to develop other ways of reassessing social discourses about gender and health in the southern African context.

In the next article, Mutshidzi Maraganedzha questions: 'Can we eliminate race?' Using a normative approach, he engages Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of race eliminativism which suggests obliteration of the concept of race from public discourses. He notes the polemics that have persisted among philosophers on the question whether to eliminate or retain the concept of race in public social discourses. He underlines that the notion of race should be maintained and only re-conceptualized in terms that are non-racist and affirmation of equality of all human beings and social justice that transcends racial boundaries.

The final section consists of five articles which are dedicated to the contributions of some renowned personalities with either African ancestry or associations. Roderick Hewitt pushes academic frontiers as he brings into conversation the legend of creative art, Bob Marley and an academia, Steve de Gruchy 'as two prophets of social change that belonged to two different eras and social locations, who lived their lives in the fast lane and died in the prime of their lives and career development'. He argues Marley's Redemption Song exemplified the 'spirituality that undergirded de Gruchy's theology of development and its accompanying Olive Agenda'. While Marley symbolically used Marijuana as a 'tree of life' for the 'healing of the nations', de Gruchy used Olive tree as representation of the same. Hewitt noted that Marley and de Gruchy not only did they embody 'a unique form of integrated and open spirituality' but were also 'committed ultimately to the service of life'.

Simangaliso Kumalo borrows Pliny the Elder's popular saying *Ex Africa semper aliquid Novi* (something new always comes from Africa) to establish that 'the vision of a self-reliant and developed continent' were already somehow articulated by Pixley ka Isaka Seme in 1906 in his speech,

‘the Regeneration of Africa’. Kumalo notes that Seme already developed some contours for uniting African tribes in 1912 through his facilitation to establish South African Native National Congress (SNNC) - a forerunner of the African National Congress (ANC). Kumalo argues that while the traces of African Renaissance may not be explicit in NEPAD, OAU and the African Parliament, they still live ‘in the dreams, aspirations and imagination of patriotic Africans’. Thus, Kumalo calls for the rebirthing of the memory of Seme and rearticulating his ideas for fresh strategies of resisting new imperialism and colonialism.

Kaunda, Owino and Phiri contest the applicability of Bediako’s translatability theory in the context of European missionary masculinity performance in 19<sup>th</sup> century Africa. They argue that missionaries’ gender ideological was deeply entrenched in the process of translation and in the politics of interpretation of Christian faith which was transposed into African worldviews. They therefore suggest some ways to consider for the way forward for decolonising African masculinities in African Christianity.

The article by Sibusiso Masondo, ‘Prophets never die?’ examines the life and ministry of Petros Masango who was a bishop in St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission seceding and forming an independent ministry after a long court battle with the female founder Ma Christinah Nku. He noted that the patriarchal system that was embedded in the theology of that time did not allow her to head the church. Masondo established that the story of Masango and struggle for control over the church represents an epistemological bondage of some African churches to Euro-western Christian paradigm of gender that was introduced by missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In crowning this issue, the final article by Johannes A. Smit, ‘Beyers Naudé as Post-colonial Theologian’, resurrects the memory of an Afrikaner Dutch Reformed cleric and theologian, Beyers Naudé who defied the generic Afrikaner ethos of the day to become an anti-apartheid and social justice advocate. Smit argues that Naudé’s increasing consciousness of the negative effects that the apartheid ideology had on the majority of the black population in South Africa, resulted in the establishment of ‘inter-denominational Bible Study groups, the pro-liberation inter-denominational and inter-racial journal *Pro Veritate* (1962) as well as the well-known Christian Institute (1963)’. Smit concludes that Naudé’s theological thought was entrenched in an ‘inclusive ecumenical Christian message as confessing public theologian’.

The thread that binds these critical articles together is their engage-

ment with empire religions and theologies and how indigenous knowledge systems can contribute to the liberation of African subjectivity, ways of knowing, knowledge production and transform institutions of higher learning.

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