

Doing Church Differently: Crafting a Church Using the Circle's Theologizing Methodologies in a Xenophobic and Gendered Context

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, alternatively known as the Circle, are a group known for their circle of knowledge sharing, whereby they sit together and share stories with participants actively listening and engaging with what is offered. The Circle is also known as a young forum for theological dialogue and mentorship. Launched in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the concept of the Circle has been prominent in African women's (practical) theologies. However, it has yet to be explicitly applied to xenophobic contexts. Using the stories of selected African migrant women congregants at St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC), this article argues that employing the Circle's methodologies of theologizing offers an alternative way of creating a relevant church in a xenophobic and gendered context. This argument is premised on three sub-arguments: First, employing such methodologies requires voicing migrant women's experiences of gender-based marginalization and violence to inform the church's support to victims. Second, their experiences of inclusion in the church would shape how cultural diversity is handled. Third, migrant women's "individualized" experiences of God would inform the church's communal approach to living together and promote sisterhood among migrant women and between migrant and host community women. This article focuses on the sensory aspects of the Eucharist including the sharing of food, smells/incense, and narratives to explore and examine the experiences of African women migrating within Africa. It also examines the potential of the Circle in nurturing a more vibrant and inclusive church.

KEYWORDS

Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, African women's theologies, Xenophobic contexts, St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC), African migrant women.

Introduction

"[M]aybe they don't see it that way, they don't know what they are doing, they are trying to put a gap between foreigners and themselves. That is how I feel."¹

¹ Interview with Aداوو. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

According to St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC) leadership member, Nomthandazo, national diversity plays a significant role in shaping the setting of SAAC, observing that migrants seek to bring their national practices into the church, possibly due to a desire for familiarity and continuity with their home cultures. SAAC comprises migrants from various countries, such as Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Cameroun, Botswana, and Lesotho, alongside South Africans from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Managing diverse communities and perspectives can present challenges. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) points out that any theology must effectively center the narratives, experiences, and spiritualities of marginalized individuals to retain its relevance, transformative capacity, and liberating potential. The Circle was launched in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye² with the intention of amplifying the voices, experiences, and views of African women by means of theologies and praxis.³ The Circle is a relatively new model of church and society.⁴ As Oduyoye puts it, “[t]he injustice that women experience has become the context of their [theologies]”.⁵ In South Africa, African migrant women are marginalized and their experiences can include harrowing accounts of migration. Adaugo’s words, cited above, resonate deeply with the experience of many African migrant women particularly when xenophobic circumstances are tragically normalized in the church.

In situations where congregants attending a church operating within the xenophobic and gendered framework of South African migration, the Circle offers the potential to engage in meaningful and transformative exchanges of narratives with local church members. Narratives that are interconnected

² Musa Dube, “The Circle of Life: African Women Theologians’ Engagement with HIV and AIDS,” 191. Also see Hazel Ayanga, “Voice of the voiceless: The legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2 (2016): 1.

³ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians,” *Missiology: An International Review*, XXXIII, no. 1 (2005): 29–46.

⁴ Dube, “HIV and AIDS Research and Writing in the Circle of African Women Theologians 2002-2006,” 191.

⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 82.

are opportunities for transformation within the narratives between migrant women and the women of the host community, as well as transformative to the church's perception of itself. Such transformation can ignite personal growth and change,⁶ influencing the way the church ministers to its congregation and disrupting xenophobic sentiments. In adhering to the call of the Eucharist to communion, the Circle invites and urges re-commitment to solidarity with those most marginalized within South Africa's xenophobic and gendered context. As such, the Eucharist serves as a point of departure and continual return in this article.

Xenophobic sentiments towards migrants⁷ in the context of feminized migration⁸ can be read as "social death". Drawing on Achille Mbembe's notion of social death, African migrant women are often "divested of political status and reduced to bare life".⁹ In numerous instances, migration becomes an involuntary experience, particularly for African migrant women migrating from the southern regions of Africa, that compels many to engage in transnational mothering and care work (along with the inherent challenges)

⁶ Denise Ackermann, "Living with difference and otherness: A response to the stories from Canada, Spain, and Italy", *Regreso y Encuentro—Reflexiones teológicas* (2007): 1–10.

⁷ Ganzamungu Zihindula; Anna Meyer-Weitz, and Olagoke Akintola, "Lived experiences of Democratic Republic of Congo refugees facing medical xenophobia in Durban, South Africa." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 4 (2017): 458-470.

⁸ Anastasia Christou & Eleonore Kofman, "Gender and Migration: An Introduction: IMISCOE Short Reader". Accessed 18 January 2023, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-91971-9_1. See Also, Lucio Paulina Maymon, "The Feminization of Migration: Why are Women Moving More? Cornell Policy Review", accessed 10 December 2022, <http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/the-feminization-of-migration-why-are-women-moving-more/>.

⁹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 12.

as well as other forms of feminized labor inside¹⁰ and outside the household.¹¹

How can the church assert its relevance in the era of feminized migration¹² and prevailing xenophobia?¹³

The rise of the Circle can be seen as a call for solidarity with African migrant women through the promotion of healing and wholeness.¹⁴ In a roundtable discussion on women and social justice, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat, and Farah Zeb¹⁵ proposed revisiting religious practices and advocated the embrace of tradition in the crafting of contemporary living forms of religion.

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- ¹⁰ UN Women, "How Migration is a Gender Equality issue: Migrant Domestic Workers", accessed 14 December 2023, <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/migration/en/index.html#:~:text=Migration%20is%20a%20gendered%20process,as%20domestic%20and%20care%20work>. The United Nations (UN) Women report on gender equity and migration notes that at least 74% of female migrants are engaged in domestic work compared to 26% of male migrants. Moreover, approximately 40% of countries worldwide lack labor laws that specifically protect and cover the rights and working conditions of domestic workers. Most migrant women tend to remain confined to their workplace, which, in turn, renders them more vulnerable to labor and human rights abuses. Additionally, many migrant women find themselves in street vending, selling goods or services in public spaces such as the streets, sidewalks, or open markets. People who are street vending often lack access to labor protections and can be exposed to various forms of abuse, including labor rights violations, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as racism and xenophobia.
- ¹¹ Kezia Batisai, "Rethorising Migration: A South-South Perspective", in Migration in Southern Africa IMISCOE Regional Reader, eds. Pragna Rugunanan Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, (Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 16.
- ¹² Lungile Prudence Zondi and Nolwazi Magwaza, "Women Taking Agency through Feminized Migration Patterns and Remittances: Socio-Economic Experiences of Migrant Street Vendors, Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal-South Africa." *Advances in Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (2023): 30. 29–40.
- ¹³ Misago Jean Pierre and Loren Landau, "'Running Them Out of Time:' Xenophobia, Violence, and Co-Authoring Spatiotemporal Exclusion in South Africa", *Geopolitics* 28, no. 4 (2023): 1611-1631.
- ¹⁴ See Haddad Beverly, "Reframing women's agency in #Blessed sex: Intersectional dilemmas for African women's theologies," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no.2 (2022): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6603>.
- ¹⁵ Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat and Farah Zeb, "Roundtable Discussion from the Annual Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice Public Lecture on Economies of Violence", *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27, no. 2 (2021): 98.

Echoing Brigalia Bam's proposal, the Circle offers an alternative blueprint for the church¹⁶ that recalls and recommits the common union that is central to the Eucharist. Brigalia's insights guide this article whereby adopting the Circle's theologizing methodologies the article offers an alternative approach to practicing church in the context of feminized migration and xenophobia, opening possibilities for a more relevant and empowering church.

David Kirwa Tarus's writings on the Circle's theologizing methodologies¹⁷ highlight the significance of African migrant women's stories. Tarus's work centers the narrative, perspectival, plural (the multicultural, multi-religious, multi-racial), communal, and feminist approaches.

This article suggests that the Circle's theologizing methodologies could serve to amplify SAAC African migrant women's narratives. By listening to and acknowledging African migrant women's accounts, the church can sustain its relevance, foster liberation, and drive transformation amid the challenges of feminized migration and xenophobia. Due to space constraints, this article will confine itself to the first three approaches identified in Tarus's writings on the Circle's theologizing methodologies:¹⁸ 1) the narrative approach, 2) the perspectival approach, and 3) the plural (the multicultural, multi-religious, multi-racial) approach.¹⁹ Additionally, given South Africa's significant level of religiosity, the Circle's methodologies hold particular pertinence and applicability and as such will be the geographical focus of this article.²⁰

The ethnographic case study presented is of African migrant women who participated in church activities at SAAC in 2017 in Yeoville, an inner-city

¹⁶ Brigalia Bam is cited in Musa Dube, "HIV and AIDS Research and Writing in the Circle of African Women Theologians 2002-2006", in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Nontando Hadebe (Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2009). 160. 173–196.

¹⁷ David Kirwa Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians", *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 33, no.1 (2018): 4–5.

¹⁸ Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians", 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See *Introducing African Women's Theology*, "Introductions in Feminist Theology", 82.

neighborhood of Johannesburg, South Africa. Drawing insights from Dube,²¹ the term “African migrant women” is used to refer to Zimbabwean and Nigerian migrant women who attended SAAC and took part in this research. The discussion in this article is premised on four main parts: (1) the ethnographic journey of data collection; (2) the Circle's theologizing methods; (3) the SAAC's African migrant women's unique narratives, identities and perspectives; and (4) the conclusions drawn from the Circle to imagine what a church inspired by the experiences of African migrant women could look like.

Ethnography: Collecting the narratives of African migrant women

Due to the fear of being faced with xenophobia, not every migrant woman at SAAC initially identified as such.²² However, when African migrant women at SAAC learned that I, too, was a migrant, some invited me to their home. The African migrant women at SAAC were mainly from Zimbabwe and Nigeria and attended SAAC in 2017 or before. Some of the women were housewives, their roles being dictated by cultural expectations, while others were domestic workers or worked in their husbands' businesses. Two participants were cashiers in a shop while some were unemployed. Most of the women were single mothers.

The data discussed in this article was collected through two qualitative methods: one-on-one, in-person, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Thirteen women took part in this research, ages ranging from 23 to 55 years, and had lived in South Africa between 2 and 22 years. The semi-structured interview questions focused on three main areas: personal information, experiences of the church, and theological questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and lasted on average one hour and thirty

²¹ Musa Dube, “HIV and AIDS Research and Writing in the Circle of African Women Theologians 2002–2006”, in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Nontando M. Hadebe (Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2009), 184–186.

²² Roller R. Margaret and Lavrakas J. Paul, *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015).

minutes. Over a ten-month period, I actively participated in various SAAC activities, observed interactions, listened attentively, and documented my observations in field notes. I attended thirty services and engaged in numerous post-service interactions, church meetings, and celebratory events, such as fundraisers, heritage days, Easter gatherings, women's outings, welcoming of the new priest and her licensing. I also attended funerals, healing events, and visited hospitalized church members. This extensive engagement provided valuable insights into the culture and dynamics of the church community and resulted in a rich documentation of SAAC life.²³

The data underwent analysis utilizing the thematic analysis method of data analysis, facilitated by the Atlas-ti software. Employing the Circle's methodologies of theologizing as thematic frameworks, I categorized narratives that accentuated life-threatening encounters, accounts reflecting the super-diversity of SAAC, and narratives revealing a theology of God.

The Circle's methodology for theologizing

Below is a brief review and application of the Circle methodologies as identified by Tarus's approaches.

The narrative approach, which uses the terms "narrative", "storytelling", and "stories" interchangeably, holds great significance for the Circle. It aligns with Oduyoye's emphasis on a "society sensitive" theology by amplifying women's experiences. Thereby, the Circle addresses prevailing societal issues, offering a platform for meaningful storytelling that reflects African migrant women's realities.²⁴ According to Tarus, as discussed in dialogue with Masimbi Kanyoro, "African theology without the faith story of African women is a theology that is incomplete and contextually inept".²⁵ The storytelling approach is materialized in the meaning of the "Circle" that symbolizes a group of people sitting together "face-to-face listening intently

²³ Bryman, *Social research methods*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67.

²⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 17.

²⁵ Tarus, "Social Transformation in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 4.

to one another, encouraging, and challenging what is heard".²⁶ Musa Dube has observed that by retelling stories and scrutinizing oppressive perspectives, the Circle becomes transformative.²⁷ As Ackermann puts it,

telling our stories, hearing the stories of others, allows our stories to intersect. As our stories touch one another, they change, and we too are changed.²⁸

Njoroge points out that the kind of theologies that emerge from stories are holistic theologies because these stories are not philosophical or abstract in nature. Rather, they are about today's life-threatening and life-giving issues.²⁹

The plural approach within the Circle signifies a context that is multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-religious in nature. This inclusivity allows the Circle to develop diverse theologies, welcoming women from various faiths, backgrounds, and life experiences.³⁰ Oduyoye perceives the theologies born in this intricate context as ecologically sensitive, as they strive to express women's viewpoints on the challenges that affect them.³¹ In other words, the way members of the Circle *experience* life shapes the theology it produces.³² According to Esther Mombo, the Circle exemplifies many African families, comprising members from different denominations who coexist

²⁶ Bridget Marie Monohan, *Writing, Sharing, Doing: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (PhD diss., Boston College, 2004), 11.

²⁷ Musa Dube, "Circle Readings of the Bible/Scriptures." In *Study of Religion in Southern Africa Essays in Honour of G.C.Oosthuizen*, eds. Smit, Johannes, and Pratap Kumar (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 78.

²⁸ Ackermann M. Denise, "Living with difference and otherness: A response to the stories from Canada, Spain and Italy", *Regreso y Encuentro—Reflexiones teológica* (2006): 9.

²⁹ Njoroge Nyambura, "The missing voice: African women doing theology", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 79

³⁰ Esther Mombo, "Considerations for an Inclusive Global Theological Education," *Ecumenical Review* 71, no.4 (2019): 454.

³¹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 17.

³² Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 4. See also Nontando Hadebe "Not in our name without us" - The intervention of Catholic Women Speak at the Synod of Bishops on the Family: A case study of a global resistance movement by Catholic women", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no.1 (2016): 1–9.

harmoniously. This unity amid diversity characterizes the Circle's methodology, reflecting its commitment to fostering understanding and inclusivity.³³

Moreover, the Circle adopts a perspectival approach to theology, as the theologies it generates are deeply influenced by women's experiences. In storytelling, the Circle places considerable emphasis on the actors' perspectives, the meanings they attribute to their stories, and their own agency.³⁴ This approach prioritizes diverse viewpoints on issues that permeate everyday life, thus, shaping the Circle's theologies in a perspectival manner. The viewpoints offered by the Circle shed light on experiences that significantly impact women's lives.³⁵ As Dube argues, tradition should be interpreted in ways that are liberating and empowering to all "earth's society".³⁶ The Circle's methodologies embody this vision, aiming to offer perspectives that resonate with the lived realities of diverse individuals and foster empowerment in their lives.

Narratives, diversity, and perspectives - African migrant women

This section explores the distinct identities, life experiences, and perspectives of African migrant women, focusing on narratives that are predominantly specific to living through the challenges of migration. It sheds light on the cultural diversity experienced by African migrant women, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings between local and migrant church members. Lastly, this section delves into the perspective of African migrant women's relationship with God.

³³ Esther Mombo, "Doing Theology from the Perspective of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 1, no.1 (2003): 91–103.

³⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 16.

³⁵ Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 4.

³⁶ Musa Dube, "Translating Cultures: The Creation of Sin in the Public Space of Batswana," *Scriptura* 114, no.1 (2015): 7–8.

According to Phiri, African migrant women's stories are multi-dimensional,³⁷ adding necessary complexity to recent research suggesting a focus on the autonomy and subjectivities of migrant women.³⁸ The narratives of African migrant women in the context of migration in South Africa reveal similar hardships. By amplifying their stories, a crucial step can be made towards "being prophetic to one another and hopefully of giving justice a better deal".³⁹

Feminized employment/double socialization

African migrant women face significant stress in their employment. Chiedza, cited below, along with several others, shared their experiences of the demanding and low-paying work of child-minding, which entails long working hours. This situation had a detrimental impact on Chiedza's health, a challenge also faced by individuals in similar circumstances. Chiedza explains,

I [am] stressed [about] work, [about] everything ... I look after kids, I have to clean the house, I have to cook, to do everything [in the house] ... That's for every day ... HUUU! I sleep when kids sleep, then when kids sleep that is the time that I stop working ... every day from Monday to Saturday ... Sunday is my off day if Madam is at home.⁴⁰

Scholars⁴¹ have recorded similar experiences among migrant women and these experiences echo their work ethic of survival.⁴² Chiedza worked as a

³⁷ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Contextual Theologies of Southern Africa." In *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156.

³⁸ Christou and Kofman, "Gendered Migrations and Conceptual Approaches: Theorising and Researching Mobilities," 13.

³⁹ Dube, "HIV and AIDS Research and Writing in the Circle of African Women Theologians 2002-2006", 217.

⁴⁰ Interview. 2017.10.29. Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁴¹ See Susheela Mcwatts, "The Role of Religion in the Lives, Agency, and Activism of Domestic Worker Leaders," *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27, no. 2, (2021): 45–66.

⁴² Johannes Machinerya, "'We maZimba... There Is Nothing That We Cannot Do': The Work Ethic of Undocumented Zimbabwean Day Labourers in eMalahleni, South Africa." In *Migration in Southern Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader*, eds. Pragna Rugunanan and

child-minder in a Zimbabwean household, where she described earning R2000⁴³ despite shouldering all the household chores and working long hours six days a week. The mother of the children, who worked at a bank, also experienced constant stress due to the demands of her job. This scenario reflects a common experience for many employees, particularly women with children. According to Anna Amelina and Helma Lutz, this stress can be attributed to the double socialization of women whereby they are expected to fulfil simultaneous roles as caregivers at home and breadwinners in the workforce. Consequently, these women often continue in paid employment while hiring others to take on the domestic responsibilities.⁴⁴ This double socialization reinforces the "asymmetry of doing gender", creating a context in this research that poses potential life-threatening risks to African migrant women who undertake all household chores for a monthly salary of R2000. Additionally, Chiedza's stressful and underpaid employment situation negatively impacts her ability to make critical decisions in the management of her diabetic condition. During fieldwork, Chiedza was hospitalized due to complication with diabetes. Tragically, she passed away shortly after my fieldwork concluded.

Being a housewife in the context of migration is a unique experience that was shared by another African migrant woman, Adaugo. A 28-year-old mother of two toddlers, Adaugo had an engineering degree from her home country before migrating to South Africa to join her husband. In South Africa, she was expected by her family to take on the role of a housewife and impart her home culture to her children, despite Adaugo's other aspirations. However, due to an inability to find someone who understood her culture to assist her at home, Adaugo was unable to pursue her dream of becoming an academic. Isolated in South Africa, with only her husband and his brother as acquaintances, Adaugo explains,

Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama. (Springer, 2020), 231–245, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92114-9>.

⁴³ According to Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1227081/average-monthly-earnings-in-south-africa/>) from 2015–2018, the average income in the formal, non-agricultural sector was 26,000R monthly.

⁴⁴ Amelina Anna, and Helma Lutz, *Gender and migration: Transnational and intersectional prospects*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.

I wanted to do both at the same time [kids and career], huuu, before I got married, I was just saying that I am not going to be a housewife. But after everything, I was saying, he is going to work, I [am] out of work, he takes] care of the kids, so I have to abandon everything... Even when I got married I didn't change my mind, it was a kind of problem between [me] and my husband. But my mom talked to me that if I abandon my children, who will teach them? How are they going to be when they are grown up? Then, when they grow up, what if I do not like what they will become? It is better I do the training myself... I wanted to maybe get my PhD before having any children... He said that it is better to have children when you are young. Anyway, even when you are old, you can still go to school... I was not happy [but] I had to accept it.⁴⁵

Amelina and Lutz use the term "behavioral grammar" to describe behaviors that conform to internalized gender norms.⁴⁶ However, such behavioral patterns place African migrant women, like Adaugo, in positions of inferiority, leading to a financial dependence on their husbands. Adaugo, for instance, expresses her reluctance to live a financially dependent life: "[Y]ou don't like to be living a dependent life at that particular moment when you have the kids ... [There] are some restrictions".⁴⁷ This strain in workload may result in African migrant women feeling discouraged from pursuing their dreams, consequently posing a threat to their financial independence and overall empowerment.

The African migrant women: From dressing to cooking - exploring diversity

SAAC embraces individuals from diverse backgrounds, including various cultures, nationalities, and religious denominations, which contributes to enriching diversity within the organization. However, managing such diversity can be challenging. In numerous conversations, African migrant women emphasized that the South African norms of dressing in religious

⁴⁵ Interview. 2017.10.15. Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁴⁶ Anna, and Lutz, "Gender and migration: Transnational and intersectional prospects", 4.

⁴⁷ Interview. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

spaces differ from those practised in their home countries. Nyasha, for example, highlights the cultural contrasts between South Africa and her home country in this regard.

[I]n our culture we just dress like mothers, to have our dignity. Mama can put on a skirt, a top then sometimes a jacket. That is a mother. Even if Mama can wear formal trousers and a top, whatever it is. It is quite good. Back home Mamas are not supposed to wear trousers. Mamas are supposed to wear skirts and dresses especially when you are a member of the Mothers' Union you are not allowed to wear trousers and you are not allowed to go there headed [without covering the head]. Every mother, if a mother comes to the church, must cover her head. But here, I see mothers, they always have a civvies' Day [she laughs]. Civvies' Day means when they are not in their uniform. When Mama goes to church without covering her head she is taken to the vestry [back home]. And they take the uniform and keep it in the vestry until the end of the punishment. Because that uniform for [the] Mothers' Union, is not mine, it is like a soldier. Combat for the soldier, if the soldier is punished, they take his uniform and put it in the office. Those people will take his clothes and dress him in prison uniform and put him in prison. The way of dressing is very different [between local and migrant women].⁴⁸

According to Nyasha, cultural differences among members of SAAC extend beyond variations in dressing for church and dressing to present oneself as a church leader. She notes that cultural differences are also evident in cooking methods for the same food, particularly foods for celebratory events at church. For example, when preparing stamp (mealie rice), Nyasha notes that they refer to it as *amacakata* and cook it differently by adding *idobi* (peanut butter) instead of *cremora* (powdered milk), which she finds more appealing. Similarly, during a funeral I attended at a church member's home on May 6, 2018, they served a sorghum-based dish that some non-local attendees found too sour and unfamiliar. The dish's texture, resembling porridge rather than the thicker "*pap*" common in South Africa, made it difficult for the migrant women to eat with meat. However, the local church

⁴⁸ Interview. 2017.10.15. Johannesburg, South Africa.

members savored this traditional meal, illustrating the challenge individuals face in finding meaning and relevance when sharing a culturally diverse church space. To address this, Oduyoye suggests that theology in such contexts should be culture-sensitive and foster intentional dialogue.⁴⁹ Integrating all cultures and initiating conversations between church members from different cultures could enhance their sense of belonging.

During the interviews, many of the African migrant women I spoke to expressed feeling that their backgrounds were not being adequately appreciated within the church. This sentiment was particularly articulated by Chiasoka, a young woman in her early thirties who, after experiencing rejection due to a miscarriage and subsequent divorce in her home country, migrated and settled in South Africa. While sharing her experience of the church, she states

I don't feel interested in doing anything [at church] because I feel that it is better they do it alone, they don't give us that chance to join, maybe they don't understand it as I understand it.⁵⁰

Chiasoka's sense of rejection and disinterest in participating in shared activities echoes the feelings of other African migrant women at SAAC. She perceives that the church does not understand or appreciate her experiences, leading to her feeling excluded and highlighting the need for the voices of others who believe their backgrounds are being disregarded.

Many of the African migrant women came from diverse religious backgrounds who had married Anglican men, exemplified by Nomthandazo's account of her initial encounter with an Anglican church after marrying an Anglican man. Prior to marriage, Nomthandazo had no previous affiliation with the Anglican denomination or any Anglican church. Once married, due to the cultural expectations of her family, she was compelled to adopt her husband's religion. In her account of her experience, she notes,

⁴⁹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African women's theology*, 17.

⁵⁰ Interview. 2018.04.20. Johannesburg, South Africa.

I had an issue with incense because to me that was smoke in the church. Whenever someone comes with it, I used to go outside and take a deep breath so that I can have fresh air and then come back and sit right at the back ... I talked to my Dad, and [he] told me, “you know what, this man took me to this church and firstly they burn something in the church, it smells, it is not a bad smell but it is some smell and then the smoke and those things”. I think they worship something else, not the God that I know. So, I am not coming back to this church, and [my] dad said to me, “God put you there for a purpose, you are not going to leave that church”.⁵¹

Nomthandazo's situation illustrates a unique experience that many migrant women encounter. She married a man who belonged to the Anglican faith, although she had never attended an Anglican church before. Despite her husband's infrequent attendance, her father expected Nomthandazo to attend and actively participate in church activities, stating “God put you there for a purpose”. As an African migrant woman in South Africa, Nomthandazo found that the practices and traditions in the Anglican church significantly differed from those of her upbringing. This is not uncommon for African migrant women, who may be unfamiliar with the denominational differences of the Christian church.

Similarly, Adaugo had to leave her Roman Catholic identity in Nigeria to join her husband's church, though he himself did not attend SAAC regularly during the time of my fieldwork. Moreover, migrant women often find themselves holding the church together, while the men who introduced them to the church remain less involved.⁵² Sociologists suggest that our bodies are vehicles through which we exist and interact with the world.⁵³ In other words, our physical selves shape our experiences and engagements in the world. For some migrant women, the inability to connect through physical sensations, such as the scent of the incense in the church, can hinder their meaningful participation in worship. The “aroma”, akin to the Eucharist, embodies a “physical sensation of worship” capable of personal

⁵¹ Interview. 2019.03.13. Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁵² See Madipoane Masenya, “For Better or for Worse?” - the (Christian) Bible and African Women”, OTE 22, No.1 (2009): 126.

⁵³ Chris Shilling and Philip A. Mellor, Cultures of Embodied Experience: Technology, Religion and Body Pedagogics, *The Sociological Review* 55, no. (2007): 531–549.

transformation.⁵⁴ While migrants expressed the significance of embodying home during the Eucharist, a lack of connection to communal sensory experiences, such as incense, may limit their ability to fully engage in such a sacred encounter. Nevertheless, their very presence enriches the church's diversity and the church community should reflect and appreciate this diversity in its life and practices.

Individualized experiences of God

This section examines how gendered xenophobia creates barriers for the African migrant women at SAAC, hindering their ability to fully embrace a Christian life as it fosters an environment of mistrust. Through my conversations with the women, a theology of God that emerged challenges the Circle's communal theology. In the context of South African migration, where policies often limit employment opportunities for migrants,⁵⁵ several of the women interviewed felt that they had no one to turn to in their state of unemployment, resulting in a sense of isolation.

One woman, Anesu, felt abandoned by the host community to the point of lacking sufficient food. She recalls,

[t]his month I didn't even know where to get the money for eating, [I had no money], but I was just praying to God, God you know how South Africa [is], they do not care about us!⁵⁶

Anesu's sentiments shed light on the broader challenges faced by migrants in such an environment. She goes on to say that,

[p]eople [in South Africa] are not heart-full. If it was in my home country, I know that I could tell anyone at church about my life, but really in South Africa, I don't, because if I tell someone today she will go and tell the Mothers' Union ... [then my] life will be in [their hands] neh! That's why I usually pretend [that] everything is

⁵⁴ Martin F. Connell, "The Gift of Myrrh to a Church that Smells," *Studia liturgica* 37, no. 2 (2007): 218.

⁵⁵ Ruzungunde S. Vongai and Sindiso Zhou, "Attitudes towards migrant workers in South Africa: A critical discourse analysis." *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 2, no.0 (2021): 4.

⁵⁶ Interview. 2017.10.13. Johannesburg, South Africa.

fine... HUUU, most people in South Africa, people are judgmental, so that's why I keep to myself about my life ... I have just accepted it because I know how life is in South Africa.⁵⁷

Wim addresses these experiences and proposes that being a Christian should inherently be a communal rather than a private matter.⁵⁸ This understanding is supported by Oduyoye's advocacy for Christian anthropology⁵⁹ that actively listens to the voices of the afflicted, promoting life-enhancing relationships.⁶⁰ Similarly, the Circle's ecclesiology emphasizes the importance of modelling the household of God within the community.⁶¹

Conclusion: Being a contextually relevant church

This article has explored the potential of utilizing the Circle's methodologies of theologizing to establish a distinct church that remains relevant in the face of xenophobic and gendered challenges. Jerry Pillay points out that the Church of Jesus Christ has historically viewed societal transformation as integral to its mission.⁶² However, this transformation is incomplete if the church neglects the experiences of migrant women, as emphasized by Oduyoye.⁶³ By exploring the narratives of selected African migrant women, this study advocates for the application of the Circle's narratives, multiculturalism, and perspectival approach to foster a relevant and, therefore, transformative and liberating church.⁶⁴ The article sheds light on the perspectives of African migrant women who indicate a level of mistrust towards their host faith community. In this conclusion, I contemplate on how

⁵⁷ Interview. 2018.01.10. Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁵⁸ Wim Dreyer, "The real crisis of the church." *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2822>.

⁵⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 137.

⁶⁰ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women Theology*, 48.

⁶¹ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 124–125.

⁶² Jerry Pillay, "The church as a transformation and change agent," *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no.3 (2017): 1-12.

⁶³ See Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 4.

⁶⁴ Tarus, "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 5.

a church that genuinely embraces the presented narratives, diversity, and perspectives concerning God can remain relevant and, therefore, transformative and liberating in the context of xenophobia and gender-based marginalization.

First, the narratives experienced by African migrant women in South Africa, to think with Musa Dube, articulate their theological struggles and quest for empowerment within God's household.⁶⁵ To promote the empowerment of these women, it is crucial for them to voice and center their stories, fostering a sense of inclusion.⁶⁶ By doing so, Christian churches that function in a similar context to SAAC can actively and sustainably address the challenges faced by migrant women by creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Inspired by Nadar's call for researchers to use narrative research and remain accountable in their theories and practices, I believe the stories of low remuneration, poor work conditions, and financial dependency prevalent among migrant women hold significant value as "data with a soul".⁶⁷ Integrating these narratives can enrich the church's accountability in its ministry, particularly in the context of diversity and the experiences of black migrant women.

By centering the experiences of migrant women, this approach challenges dominant narratives,⁶⁸ specifically those fueling xenophobia in South Africa. Such efforts can foster a more inclusive and responsive theological praxis, recognizing the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their social location or identity. However, research by Saldanha and Hankela indicates that non-ordained women may not feel comfortable naming their experiences of exclusion in the Anglican church.⁶⁹ Therefore, mentoring all

⁶⁵ Musa Dube, 2001, "Introduction: 'Little Girl, Get Up!'" In Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women, eds. Nyambula Njoroge and Musa Dube, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 5.

⁶⁶ Also see Saldanha Colette and Elina Hankela, "An Emerging Framework of Inclusion: Listening to the Voices of Non-Ordained Anglican Women," *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 28, no 1 (2022): 15.

⁶⁷ Nadar Sarojini, "'Stories are data with Soul'-lessons from black feminist epistemology," *Agenda* 28, no.1(2014): 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

⁶⁹ Saldanha and Hankela, "An Emerging Framework of Inclusion," 1-24.

community members on how to be assertive about their experiences is crucial. Mentorship, often in collaboration with other organizations, through the Circle has proven to be effective in encouraging silenced voices.⁷⁰ By adopting such strategies, the church can challenge patriarchal structures by addressing the context of migration that hinders African migrant women from personal and professional growth and development.

Second, the experiences of diversity among African migrant women underscore the importance of recognizing and embracing cultural diversity within the church, making inclusivity essential for the church to regain and maintain its relevance and liberating, transformative potential. By incorporating the diverse experiences shared by African migrant women and other church members, the church can establish effective approaches to honoring cultural differences, fostering an atmosphere of understanding, acceptance, and unity.

Given the increase in cultural diversity of migration, the concept of "super-diversity"⁷¹ has been highlighted in both the literature on migration and contemporary religious spaces.⁷² The experience and existence of super-diversity within Christianity demand that churches creatively rethink their approaches to church life. In line with Musa Dube's findings in a Botswana community, where understanding salvation required translation consistent with their culture,⁷³ the experiences of African migrant women emphasize the need to understand how host church culture translates to all its members. Acknowledging the daily struggles and diverse narratives of the "many Africas" present in our churches is imperative.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989-2008)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34, no.2(2008): 7-8.

⁷¹ David Parkin and Karel Arnaut, "Super-diversity & Sociolinguistics—a digest." *Tilburg Papers in Cultural Studies* 95 (2014): 3-4.

⁷² Christou and Kofman, "Gender and Migration," 98.

⁷³ See Dube, "Translating Cultures," 4.

⁷⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-Winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa: The Inaugural Address." In Talitha Qumi! *Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, eds. Oduyoye Mercy Amba Mercy and Musimbi Kanyoro (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990), 27.

The various stories of African migrant women at SAAC highlight the rich and diverse experiences these women bring with them and call for the church to listen attentively. Their struggles are the struggles of the church to rediscover the dignity, respect, and identity of its members within xenophobic and gendered contexts.⁷⁵ The challenges faced by African migrant women, in connecting with communal sensory experiences of the Eucharist, illustrate the necessity of reevaluating how the Eucharistic celebration can reignite its transformative potential for all participants in facilitating meaningful engagement for every member of the church community.⁷⁶ Cultural elements, such as smell (incense), food, or clothing, have the potential to mend relationships impacted by xenophobia and gendered context. Developing approaches to the Eucharist that embrace diversity is particularly relevant considering that African migrant women who share spaces in churches, such as SAAC, are often present due to the pressures they face to disown their own faith and/or culture during marriage and migration.⁷⁷

Adopting the Circle's methodologies of theologizing could disrupt impulses to “put a gap between foreigners and themselves”⁷⁸ and, instead, offer an alternative pathway for the creation of relevant, transformative, and liberating churches in xenophobic and gendered contexts. The Circle calls for solidarity with migrant women.

⁷⁵ Esther, “Doing Theology from the Perspective of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” 98.

⁷⁶ Nnaemeka Obioma, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practising, and pruning Africa’s way,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no.2 (2003): 357–385.
Nnaemeka Obioma, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practising, and pruning Africa’s way,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no.2 (2003): 357–385.

⁷⁸ Interview. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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