

Editorial: Sacred Earth and African Women's Theology

Sophia Chirongoma¹ and Sue Rakoczy²

¹SHORT BIO

Sophia Chirongoma is a senior lecturer in the Religious Studies Department at Midlands State University, Zimbabwe. She is also an Academic Associate/Research Fellow at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) in the College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research interests and publications focus on the interface between culture, ecology, religion, health and gender justice.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Religious Studies Department at Midlands State University, Zimbabwe; Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) in the College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa (UNISA)
sochirongoma@gmail.com or sochirongoma@yahoo.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8655-7365>

²SHORT BIO

Sue Rakoczy is Professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at St Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara and Honorary Professor in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research focuses on feminist theology, eco-feminism and the intersection between spirituality and social justice.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Systematic Theology and Spirituality at St Joseph's Theological Institute, Cedara; School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics of the University of KwaZulu-Natal
srakoczymonroe@gmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0626-4897>

This special issue is one of the nine academic publications emerging from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (the Circle) Fifth Pan-African Conference, held at the University of Botswana (Gaborone), July 2-5, 2019. The conference was also a commemoration of the Circle's thirty years of existence. It featured papers on some aspects of the theme, "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination." As was noted in the Conference Call for Papers:

The land is often constructed as female gendered and the oppression of women is interlinked with the oppression of the Earth; and...it is widely acknowledged that we live in the era of global warming - which is humanly induced and of which many have also

linked with anthropocentric religious/cultural/theological perspectives.¹

Furthering the theme of the conference, this special issue interrogates, not only the links between “gender, land, race, class, ethnicity, colonialism, globalization and environmental sustainability”; it specifically focuses on contextual examples of the ways that women, nature, sacred sites, and theology are connected. The volume therefore seeks to add a melodious chord to the existing body of literature on African, eco-feminist religion and theology by presenting some case studies on the interface between religion, gender and the ecological crisis in our contemporary times

The first article, *A Dark Green Religious Analysis of the Life and Work of Wangari Maathai (1940 - 2011)* focuses on the work of one of the great African ecological conservationists. Author, Louisa Johanna Hannelie du Toit, offers a cogent and generative discussion of Bron Taylor’s conceptualisation of Dark Green Religion and deploys its underlying principles of, belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness to uncover and underline the significance and scope of Maathai’s contribution to the field of ecological conservation. This essay is critical because it is one of the few published explorations of Maathai’s contributions to ecofeminism within the African context and beyond. This article is an important record of how Africa’s first woman Nobel Peace Prize laureate has both figuratively and literally shifted the fields in paradigmatic ways.

In keeping with the metaphor of the functional productivity of fields, in the article, “Sisters in Solidarity: Resistance and Agency Through Urban Community Food Gardens in Pietermaritzburg”, Linda Naicker, offers an empirical study of women’s experiences and practices within the context of

¹ Musa Dube, “Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/ Religious/ Cultural/ Philosophical Imagination”, Unpublished Call for Papers for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian 5th Pan-African Conference circulated via email on December 11, 2018.

food production and (in)security. She provides a thought-provoking analysis that invokes a variety of intersections among marginalization, inequality, and subjugation. In adopting the theoretical resources provisioned by African Women's Theology and Oikos Theology, Naicker both theorises and theologises "how ecological and indigenous wisdom [are] applied in urban community food gardens and produce mutually sustaining relationships between local communities and the earth." Additionally, Naicker argues that in mitigating food insecurity, ecological consciousness also empowers women to resist other intersecting systems and structures of oppression and exclusion.

Following the theme of gendered insecurity set by Naicker, Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma, in the article "Gender and Access to Land Ownership: The Experiences of Malawian Widows and the Absence of the Church", articulates the vulnerability of widows in relation to issues of inheritance and expulsion from their matrimonial homes and communities. Based on in-depth interviews with Malawian women, Kapuma raises and addresses important and urgent questions regarding the enabling conditions of gendered insecurity on the multiple challenges faced by widows. She challenges churches to exercise critical solidarity with the widows in their time of need.

Authors Sophie Chirongoma and Ezra Chitando in the article entitled, "What Did We Do to Our Mountain?": African Eco-Feminist and Indigenous Responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, Zimbabwe", explicate and explain religio-cultural interpretations of Cyclone Idai as produced and presented by the survivors of this ecological catastrophe. The authors conducted their interviews just over a month after Cyclone Idai wreaked havoc in the Chimanimani and Chipinge districts and this article offers a rare glimpse into how lived experiences are informed by conditions of crisis created by forces of nature. This article provides an illuminating discussion of how Christian and Indigenous optics frame interpretations and responses to the phenomenon of the cyclone. Furthermore, the authors adopt expansive and inclusive African eco-

feminist lenses to articulate and nuance the interfaces of religion, gender, and nature as experienced by the people of the regions that were the most adversely affected by Idai.

An additional contribution to this compendium of ecologically-oriented contributions to scholarship on religion and gender, is a review article by Mutale Kaunda, titled, "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions". Kaunda presents an overview of current debates about indigenous rituals, gender and ecology. This paper also examines how ritual functions as a tool for understanding how contemporary African people's search for justice can be gleaned within African rituals to attain women's agency.

Collectively, the contributions make links between ecological conditions and challenging aspects of African life such as fundamentalist Christianity and gendered interpersonal violence. Additionally, the volume provides a coherent demonstration of the inseparable link between African Women's Theology and the living environment. The articles go beyond theory and offer vivifying contextual engagement to clearly elucidate how women, theology, and nature in Africa are linked. As this introductory piece draws to a close, it seems befitting to echo the sentiments raised by Alease Brown as she was beckoning women to unshackle the chains of patriarchal injustice amidst the water crisis situation in Cape Town, South Africa. She said:

Women must embrace their power in the church to lead the discursive transformation. Because material conditions are not the key issue that is at stake, the root of the issue, with its sexist implications is best addressed by women naming and acting in resistance against the discourse that persistently imperils their lives. Women called and gifted to lead, must do so, even if this engenders significant tension within specific cultural contexts. It is women who must determine and assert what is required for their flourishing, as opposed to what might be endured for their survival. The vision of

flourishing must be held before the people, along with the hope that such a future is God's eternal, and present, reality for the disinherited.²

Although the above excerpt is drawn from a text written to address a specific context, the message speaks eloquently to the key concerns raised in this volume. It is our sincere hope that this special issue successfully serves a two-fold purpose, i.e., celebrating the life of Dr. Alease Brown whilst affirming the sacredness of Mother Earth amidst the ecological crisis which is threatening the health and well-being of all Earth's inhabitants.

References

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