

Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions

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¹SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nexus between African indigenous religio-culture and ecology, gender, rituals and the environment, in current ritual debates. Current debates demonstrate that ritual has filtered into the public space thereby being resilient and at the same time vulnerable to exploitation by the public sphere. Examining the current debates on rites of passage, this article reviews four chapters from the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*. African indigenous rituals are spaces that produce knowledge for African ways of living. However, in search of progress, development and better life, most African people have been neglecting rites as they seem unprogressive. In ritual spaces, the novices were instructed about how to engage with nature and how to live with others within communities. Ritual spaces gave women and men (initiates) agency over a vast number of life issues. Drawing on African feminist cultural hermeneutics, I examine ritual functions as a tool to understand how contemporary African people's search for justice can be gleaned within such African rituals in order to uplift women's agency.

KEYWORDS

Rites, liminal, African women, indigenous, Mother Earth

Introduction

Many African women hold on to rites of passage as an aspect of life that informs their cultural identity despite arguments suggesting that these rites are oppressive for women. At times women are forced to be initiated because culture or community demands it. The reverse is also relevant as women look forward to being initiated because it gives them a certain identity and status in communities.

In this paper, I analyse the current debates around African women and initiation rites. My main focus is on the book, "*Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Indigenous Religions*" written by African women belonging to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle). This book emerged from the 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 5th Pan-African Conference' that was held in Botswana from 2 to 4 July 2019. The theme of the conference was 'Mother Earth and Mother

Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination.' This book drew its title from the conference theme and the chapters in the book are revised versions of papers that were presented at this conference. As can be expected in any writing on the topic of Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions, the topics are as diverse as the authors and regions they come from within Africa.

All ten chapters affirm that African indigenous religion engaged with human responsibility regarding nature and argue that the relationship between humans and nature was understood to be a symbiotic one prior to contact with Western missionaries. Some of the themes in the book include: technology in African imagination, indigenous religio-culture and ecology, gender, rituals and the environment.

An interesting thread in the book is that four out of the ten chapters engage with rituals. Indigenous rituals and rites are an important area for women's engagement because African women have been marginalized, excluded or accepted within communities due to rites. An African woman who has not undergone certain rituals that the community deems necessary for women's belonging in the community, may be ridiculed and called names, made an outcast and sometimes excluded from spaces that are for initiated women only.

My focus will be on the four chapters that overtly focus on rituals. I will draw mostly from the Bemba rite of passage, *imbusa*,¹ and the Bemba context in my engagement with the four chapters. I will draw on this context as I am more familiar with that ritual and context. Drawing on African

¹ *Imbusa* is a premarital teaching for Bemba women of Zambia. *Imbusa* are sacred emblems/visual aids handed down to Bemba brides before the wedding. A detailed explanation of *imbusa* is given in Mutale Mulenga Kaunda, "Negotiated Feminism? A Study of Married Bemba Women Appropriating the Imbusa Pre-Marital 'Curriculum' at Home and Workplace," PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2017), ix.

feminist cultural hermeneutics², the paper will demonstrate the shift in ritual understanding from private or secrecy to public. Rituals are spaces that give a glimpse into the African culture and expose elements that are life denying and those that are life-giving. From birth to death, African life follows rituals at every transition. In the book edited by Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, the significance of ritual in African societies is underscored. The authors have argued that rituals are mainly performed on and for women: in certain cases, the ritual is often drawn upon to perpetuate patriarchal enforcement, while in other cases ritual in Africa has a significant function of giving women an identity and status among their peers. Despite such accusations of its entanglements with patriarchy, it is still important to ask whether rituals empower women with a significant identity or steep them further into the patriarchal strictures of society. Rites offer a new theoretical or methodological angle through which to enter into this debate.

I also note that “This volume is dedicated to the ‘giantess’ on whose big shoulders every African woman theologian and women theologians globally are standing – Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, daughter of *Anowa*, and the founder of the Circle.” Oduyoye has written a significant preface to the book; starting with a quote from Bolaji Edowu

Where she (Africa) behaves herself according to prescription and accepts an inferior position, benevolence, which becomes her ‘poverty’, is assured, and for this she shows herself deeply and humbly grateful. If for any reason she takes it into her head to be self-assertive and claim a footing of equality, then she brings upon herself a frown, she is called names; she is persecuted openly or by indirect means; she is helped to be divided against herself... a victim who somehow is developing unexpected power

² Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

and resilience which might be a threat to the erstwhile strong.
(Idowu, 1975:77)³

This quote succinctly captures the perception about African women and Africa, globally. Elsewhere also Oduyoye⁴ succinctly states, “The uncanny resemblance between Africa as a continent of nations and the women who are Africans is what makes cultural hermeneutics an important aspect of women’s theology.” This is not only a perception; it is how women and Africa have been, and, are often treated at the global scene. Oduyoye bemoans the slow pace that Mother Africa and African women take to respond to words that are directed against them. She then delves into the essays that are offered in the book and agrees with the authors regarding the importance of the interaction between humans and nature in African Traditional Religions which affirms respect for nature. She also discusses various African cultural practices especially rituals that focus on women.

African Women and Rites of Passage – From Secrecy to Public

The African continent has vast ethnic groups and, as such, there are as various initiation rites as there are ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups have rites for both boys and girls, others only have rites for girls and still others have rites only for boys. This also relates to the fact that some ethnic groups are patrilineal⁵ and others are matrilineal⁶. Despite this, the ritual essence is the same, to pass on the values, uphold culture, enforce cultural identity and share in solidarity. At every point of transition, there is usually a ritual that needs to be performed for most if not all Africans, from birth to death.

³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Preface” in *Mother Earth Mother, Africa and African Indigenous Religions* ed. Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni, Georgina Kwanima Boateng and Molly Manyonganyise (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2020), xiii-xviii; xiii.

⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press: England, 2001), 15.

⁵ This means that the family line is traced through males.

⁶ This means that the family line is traced through the female.

These rites of passage have an emphasis on secrecy of what is taught and shared within the ritual context. This secrecy is because those who are taught share a bond of knowledge, solidarity and awareness, whereas those who are untaught should find access only through the right channels and not try to gain this knowledge from friends without going through the process of initiation themselves. Hence, the emphasis on secrecy. This is borne out by Silvia Tamale who observes while commenting on Baganda women's rite of passage called Ssenga, saying, "Behind the public silence about women's sexuality and eroticism is the realm of 'women's secrets.' Only females are privy to such secrets, with the Ssengas being the chief custodians of Baganda women's sex secrets archives."⁷

Some anthropologists interpret this secrecy as an enigma and puzzle, and stress that no one should ever talk about the teachings outside of the ritual space. Ironically these ritual teachings have now found space on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, consequently making these public rituals. For instance, imbusa premarital teaching for Bemba women of Zambia has found this space on Facebook and Instagram. Christopher Helland has observed that with the increase in use of the internet, many people "do not distinguish their life-online and life-offline."⁸ Helland further points out that when they are "offline," people know the rules and limits of their conversations or involvement in 'sacred spaces in their communities.' However, the online space has not mastered what Helland calls 'cultural memory.'⁹ This gives people freedom to express themselves in ways that they would not otherwise do if they were

⁷ Silvia Tamale "Eroticism, Sensuality and 'Women's Secrets' Among the Baganda" *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (October 2006): 89-97, 91.

⁸ Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 26.

⁹ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion*, 34.

in their offline life. Thus, in my opinion, people articulate 'online' their real feelings¹⁰ for instance, toward rites.

According to José Van Dijck, Facebook is a space where one can find unfiltered voices. Before Facebook or the internet, there were diaries and letters which were forms of communication. People have been imprisoned due to evidence found in their or the victim's diaries. José Van Dijck argues that "Blogs may well be seen as twenty-first century diaries and Facebook as a new type of 'published conversation'".¹¹ I submit that Facebook is a valid tool if not a space that women and men are using to express their frustrations and emotions in general around life, inclusive of rites, identity and experiences.

Initiation rites have empowering and disempowering aspects of the taught values and principles of life. Rites are not a one-way process but a continuous flow of beliefs in various directions in the search to interpret the meaning of cultural identity and belonging. While Africans knew their own history and their rites, they had never written it down and it was passed on orally from generation to generation. Initiation rites were spaces where part of this knowledge was passed on. While rites are for both women and men, women's rites are more pronounced due to how they have been written about. Anthropologists and missionaries were among the first people (pioneers) to write about Africa, initiation rites and history.

As they lived with the communities, Western anthropologists and missionaries put in efforts and commitment to learn their language and cultures. Their research among the people of Africa however can be "understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery,

¹⁰ While people find it easier to express themselves online, it must be kept in mind that there are also issues of privacy regarding Facebook and other social media platforms (considering data sharing, privacy invasion by State and hacking issues).

¹¹ José van Dijck, "Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity," *Television & New Media* 13, no. 2 (2012): 160-176,167.

and from the privileged to the marginalized of society.”¹² Chammah J. Kaunda calls this

...a capitalist research paradigm in which the researcher [usually middle class] functions as the centre for the exploitation, production, distribution, and circulation of knowledge emerging from the margins, which is subsequently used by the powerful to reinforce global hegemony, and hence capitalist relations of exploitation. Too often, knowledge contribution from the margins has only functioned to strengthen the centre. In short, it has worked against the margins.¹³

Research among the African population by the Western researchers is primarily owned by the researchers and their publishers. Knowledge is gathered, translated, interpreted, and it empowers and promotes the researchers while the researched remain in their marginalized and unempowered state.

As if that is not enough, some of the analysis depicts African women as being in dire conditions and unable to have a voice against injustice. It is as if African women sit down and take in all the abuse and injustice unreservedly. While some women, not only African women, find themselves in dreadful situations of abuse and unable to fight for their liberation, there are plenty of African women who are fighting for abused, marginalized, exploited and oppressed women. Obioma Nnaemeka argues that African women do not take injustice lying down.¹⁴ They negotiate

¹² Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 6. [11]

¹³ Chammah J. Kaunda, “On the Road to Emmaus Together towards Life as Conversation Partner in Missiological Research” *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 1 (2017): 34-50, 35.

¹⁴ Obioma Nnaemeka, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 21(2003), 361.

patriarchy in subtle ways and unless one is skilled in the African ways and approach to life, they would not recognize this negotiation and navigation. This subtle negotiation and navigation of patriarchy is often taught to women via rituals. Nnaemeka explains succinctly that African women, using nego-feminism, a feminism of negotiation which “knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines.”¹⁵

A case in point to illustrate how African women negotiate patriarchy and practice agency is the issue of dance in general, and erotic dance in particular. During several African rites, erotic dance is a part of the process especially if it is a puberty or a marital rite. Dancing is always a part of rites in Africa. Among the Bemba people of Zambia for instance, funerals are characterized by singing and dancing. Lianne Bronzo¹⁶, a Korean-American woman who “served as an aquaculture Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia from 2018 until being evacuated in March 2020 due to COVID-19,” writes her experience attending a Bemba funeral in Zambia, and says “the choir belt rhythms and dance in a circle with the drum beat. The whole scene was mesmerizing and went on for over an hour.”¹⁷ Gibson Ncube and Margaret Chipara discuss whether erotic dance empowers or commodifies women.¹⁸ Ncube and Chipara conclude that,

...while erotic dancing can be viewed as demeaning and denigrating to women, their bodies and sexuality, it can simultaneously be seen as a way to empower women by allowing them to subvert patriarchal

¹⁵ Obioma Nnaemeka, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way,”: 357.

¹⁶ Lianne Bronzo, “A Bemba Funeral in Zambia.” accessed May 25, 2021, <https://lIASIAN.wordpress.com/2018/06/09/a-bemba-funeral-in-zambia/>

¹⁷ Lianne Bronzo, “A Bemba Funeral in Zambia.” accessed May 25, 2021, <https://lIASIAN.wordpress.com/2018/06/09/a-bemba-funeral-in-zambia/>

¹⁸ Gibson Ncube and Margaret Chipara, “Dancing with Power: Does Erotic Dance Empower or Commodify Women?” *Buwa! Journal of African Women's Experiences* 2, no.2 (December 2013):70-75

ontologies, which regard women as objects that are to be deployed by men for their own pleasure.

This kind of negotiation and navigating of patriarchal landmines is what Nnaemeka presents as African women's way of subverting cultural constraints using cultural tools. While Western anthropologists may consider erotic dancing as commodifying women, an insider African worldview could view it differently.

Another case in point to illustrate the clash with the African worldview could be about the effects of cultural traditions on the education of women. Award winning educationist Dr. Christine Mushibwe wrote her doctoral thesis on this topic with specific reference to the Tumbuka people of Zambia. Her argument has been that rites of passage keep girls from school and once initiated, the girls do not want to go back to school because they feel old and want to stay home.¹⁹ However, in the African worldview, rites and rituals are themselves spaces of education and instructions for life and wellbeing. In fact, even before Western education was introduced, this was the form of education that African people had and shared with one another. British social anthropologist Pnina Werbner²⁰ submits,

...I propose, against early missionaries and anthropological narratives that construct Tswana girls' initiation as objectifying, subjectifying, and violent, that the Tswapong girls' puberty ritual, the mothei, endows novices with seriti, a quality that implies an active sense of autonomy, dignity, respect, and self-respect. I argue that the mothei rites enact a conjunctural, embodied dialectics of

¹⁹ Christine. P. Mushibwe, "What are the Effects of Cultural Traditions on the Education of Women? (The Study of the Tumbuka People of Zambia)," PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2009.

²⁰ Pnina Werbner, "The Hidden Lion: Tswapong Girls' Puberty Rituals and the Problem of History," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 3 (2009): 441-458, 441.

fertilization, (and) respect, as the novice is moved in and out of the hut-womb in a series of transformative phases to agency, and from darkness to protective shadow. In addition, the secret singing, dancing, and performance in the hut, the cult's esoteric lore creates moments of transgressive sexuality, creativity, fun, and conviviality, as well as posing challenging physical ordeals.

Rituals are about agency and guidance to be rooted in one's identity. Despite modernity and industrialization, African women and men continue to hold on to rites of passage because it is the essence of their cultural identity.

Overview of Women's Initiation Rites Debates in Africa

Rituals are significant in the life of African peoples. A significant volume of research into African rituals has been carried out by Western anthropologists²¹ who pioneered such research using ethnography. Thera Rasing, an anthropologist who has written extensively on Bemba women's initiation rites in Zambia, has noted that the ritual secrecy increased with the arrival of missionaries in order to prevent tainting of the rites by missionaries who were "trying to control and Christianize these rites."²²

Current discourses around ritual are significant and have started finding their way into public spaces, thereby becoming public rituals. Serawit Bekele Debele²³ observes that ritual has become a public ritual. This shift in ritual functions like public religion or public political theologies, where the ritual gets into the public sphere and sometimes changes meaning. For

²¹ Victor Taylor, "The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure," (Routledge: London, 1969); Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: Anthropology and Ethnography*, (Routledge: London, 1960); Audrey I. Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd. Faber and Faber. 1982/1956); and others have been pioneers of ritual research.

²² Thera Rasing, *The Bush Burnt, the Stones Remain: Female Initiation Rites in Urban Zambia*, (London: African Studies Centre, 2001), 26.

²³ Serawit Bekele Debele, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3.

instance, *imbusa* among the Bemba people of Zambia was a hidden rite but has slowly been transitioning into some public dimensions. Some features have become public wherein people come together publicly to talk about certain things that are taught during rituals, as a way of subverting the normative. Despite this, there is still a hiddenness to the ritual which traditionally has continued to be maintained and preserved. Certain aspects of the ritual maintains its hiddenness and air of mystery.

The ecological focus and embeddedness of ritual is becoming much stronger. This seems to be a response to current struggles around climate change that are taking place in the world, and African people are reclaiming the ecological dimensions of the ritual much more forcefully and intentionally than they did in the recent past. In a context where ritual has come to be perceived as for 'uneducated,' African women began to denounce ritual practice for fear of being perceived as primitive. Thus, African women started moving away from the dimensions that engaged with ecology too so that they would be seen as progressive. The emergence of the critique of modernity within postmodern theories has led Africans into embracing and reclaiming indigenous knowledge and aspects that they were rejecting. The importance of African identity in postcolonial context has also redefined the meaning of reclaiming what it means to be African. Achille Mbembe²⁴ has argued that the 'becoming black of the world' is an animistic enactment in contemporary times that is not just limited to the ritual context, but includes the social, economic, religious and political contexts as well. It is as if the entire public space is becoming ritualized to an extent that animistic tendencies are found everywhere. In this sense Mbembe brings animistic dimensions to ritual.

The ritual has found its place in the public spaces and I argue that the public is a space of resistance against some oppressive aspects of ritual.

²⁴ Achille Mbembe, "Introduction: The Becoming Black of the World," *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois, (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2017), 1-9, [Accessed on July 10, 2021] <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373230-003>

African culture, as Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Phiri have argued, has life-denying elements just as it has life-giving elements.²⁵ In as much as ritual is gaining a very strong position in the public spaces, it is also becoming increasingly vulnerable to political exploitation, manipulation and abuse.

There are arguments of rituals being backward and causing girls and women to drop out of school,²⁶ being oppressive toward women, and often for the benefit of men²⁷ and affecting women's health negatively.²⁸ I acknowledge that these arguments still exist and some African feminist scholars are challenging them, within the African context. However, it must be noted that these discourses/arguments operate side by side, rather than one replacing the other. Mercy Amba Oduyoye²⁹ commenting on African cultural elements, argues that, "although the Christian church has struggled to replace them with other possibilities that passed for Christian culture, these African elements did not just survive the Christian onslaught - they adamantly resisted being touched."

After studying Sylvia Tamale's³⁰ writings that demonstrate that ritual has been a space for African women's solidarity, I too shifted my understanding of ritual as a space where women are taught subordination, to an understanding of ritual as a space where women's agency³¹ is affirmed.

²⁵ Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? - Forging A Theological Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12, no. 2 (2006), 5-24.

²⁶ Mushibwe, "What are the Effects of Cultural Traditions," 1.

²⁷ Mutale Kaunda, "A Search for Life-Giving Marriage: The *Imbusa* Initiation Rite as Space for Constructing 'Wellbeing' Among Married Bemba Women of Zambia Living in Pietermaritzburg," (Masters diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2013), 41.

²⁸ Dorothy Akoto, "Women and Health in Ghana and the Trokosi Practice-An issue of Women's and Children's Rights in 2 Kings 4: 1-7" in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006): 96-112.

²⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Introduction" in *the Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 1-8; 2.

³⁰ Tamale, "Eroticism, Sensuality and "Women's Secrets," 9-36, 91.

³¹ Mutale M. Kaunda and Chammah J. Kaunda. "Infunkutu-The Bemba Sexual Dance as Women's Sexual Agency," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016), 159-175;

Rituals in rural areas continue to maintain many traditional elements that inform its practice. Christianised ritual in the cities has received disproportional attention among scholars. Recently, Sylvia Mukuka³² argued for the need for a comparative analysis between city rituals and their traditional rural versions as this remains an area that has been inadequately studied.

Positioning Mother Earth, Mother Africa in the Debate

Most African rituals have an explicit connection to the earth in its process and performance. The reason I choose to focus on ritual dimensions is because rituals often gravitate toward earth spirituality and the very title of the book under study seems to suggest a connection between women's concerns and Mother Earth, which is not a new conversation. The connection between women and nature or Mother Earth has been researched in Western scholarship as well.

Mary Mellor argued that "feminism and ecology are brought together in the ecofeminist assertion that women's subordination and the earth's degradation are linked."³³ This linking of the earth's degradation and women's subordination fails to capture the African contextual grounding in rituals and ecology. In the African context rituals are grounded in earth spirituality and ritual ideas have links to issues of climate change. African rituals have always intentionally had a strong focus on the earth and ritual teachings have resonance with the earth. Most aspects of every ritual are related to the earth- be it rituals of birth, adolescence, marriage, sex, and even death, and all of these are articulated through ecological life. African

Chammah J. Kaunda and Mutale M. Kaunda, "Imbusa as a Return to the Divine: Sexual Desire, Gender, and Female Ritual in Bemba Mythology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no.1 (2021): 27- 44.

³² Silvia Kasapatu-Mukuka, "A Quest for Embracing Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the United Church of Zambia: Pastoral Care and *Imbusa*," (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019), 174.

³³ Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press 1997), vii.

being is embedded in creation and therefore rituals call for promotion of creation. As Jacob K. Olupona argues that “it may not be out of place to speak of the ritualization of the environment as a way to describe the intricate relationship between ritual and environment in African cosmology and religion.”³⁴ For example, when announcing death among the Bemba, they usually say *noyu tulepema ebalauleta*, which is literally translated as ‘the air we are currently breathing s/he is the one blowing it to us.’ Basically, this means that when someone dies, they rot and go back to nature thereby becoming part of nature that produces air. In essence, in Africa, the ritual tends to function as a space of how to interact with the world. Such being the existential fabric where ritual and ecology are intricately interwoven with every aspect of life, the claim of eco-feminism as quoted by Mellor that earth’s degradation parallels women’s subordination seems inadequate to reflect the African context.

Beliefs that women are bestowed with wisdom to tend to nature and concepts like Mother Earth, should both be held in tension. The concept of Mother Earth implies that just as women are oppressed, so also the earth can be oppressed and exploited. It is not a simplistic or straight forward paradigm to define the earth as the mother. It has implications on how both women and the earth are dominated as something that people can exploit. Similarly, the concept of Mother Africa is also not neutral as Africa has suffered oppression and injustice relentlessly. Musa Dube has crudely and explicitly argued, “the African continent was being penetrated by the West, its male subjugator.”³⁵ Dube’s argument captures that women’s experiences regarding the penetration of the West into Africa, parallels their own oppression as African women. Both the concepts of Mother Earth

³⁴ Jacob K. Olupona, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006),1.

³⁵ Musa Dube, “The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives,” *Society of Biblical Literature Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* 13, ed. Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013):2.

and Mother Africa therefore, mirror the contextual reality that both the earth and women are seen as something to be exploited and thrown out without regard.

The ten chapters presented in the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions* show how diverse Africa is, and how inequality due to patriarchal ideologies have impacted the lives of African women in similar and yet different ways. Diverse as Africa is, there are experiences that unite the continent and African women theologians. Women's experiences are the starting point of theologizing.³⁶ African indigenous religions are rich with environmental conservation strategies. These are often seen as backward and primitive when viewed through the prism of Western researchers, anthropologists, and Western religions. However, these capture the spiritual ways of environmental conservation strategies inherent in African indigenous religions. Oduyoye has shown how there is never a dichotomy between spiritual and secular in Africa, while the late John Mbiti³⁷ has explicitly stated that "Africans are notoriously religious." For Africans, lives are religious, from birth till or sometimes even after death. Mbiti³⁸ emphasizes that

Wherever the African is, there is his [sic] religion: he (sic) carries it to the fields where he (sic) is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he (sic) takes it with him (sic) to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him (sic) to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he (sic) takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his (sic) birth to long after his (sic) physical death.

³⁶ Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? - Forging A Theological Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 12, no. 2, (2006): 8.

³⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1990), 2.

³⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

Women are the majority in religious spaces and this is one of the reasons that makes the contribution of this book important. Initiation rites are often for and about women, and while this makes the four chapters' focus on rites important, this does not in any way suggest that men do not have rites. Much as African women have been speaking out, advocating for their own rights, writing, righting and re-righting their own stories, there is still a significant number of women whose voices are necessary for the conversation to be complete. There is still a need to mediate these voices as honorably and respectfully as possible and not just add these voices to the intellectual property of the academy. I now highlight the salient arguments in each of the four chapters chosen for study.

Matholeni's chapter opens with Xhosa rituals: *KwaNtojane* for females and *ulwaluko* for males, and bemoans the inequality that these two spaces offer in terms of how men have much room for privacy while women do not. *Ulwaluko* is an initiation rite for boys that prepares them for adulthood. "KwaNtojane is an isiXhosa concept that refers to the space that a young umXhosa girl occupies from initiation to adulthood."³⁹ If a woman did not have an opportunity to be initiated as a young girl. *KwaNtojane* is later repeated in her adult life.

In these ritual spaces, women are taught regarding their womanhood, marriage and procreation while men are taught decision making and leadership. While Matholeni has admitted in her reflexivity that she never went through the ritual as a young girl, she has not shared whether she went through the ritual as an adult or not. It is also not clear whether her decision to go through or not go through the ritual was made due to observations she saw during her aunt's *KwanTojane* ritual. Most rituals have dual if not multiple interpretations and meanings of the teachings. Elsewhere, I have argued that everything that happens in a ritual space,

³⁹ Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni, "KwaNtojane: The Indigenous Rites of Passage amongst amaXhosa in Relation to Prejudiced Spaces" in *Mother Earth Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2020), 7-16,7.

from the space itself to the songs and food is a teaching and instruction to the initiate. The instructors use coded language and often the explanation given to the observers may vary from what the initiate will be taught.⁴⁰

Given this scenario, if therefore, Matholeni had not undergone the ritual, she may not have received or understood the full meaning of certain aspects of the ritual. This however, does not mean that she cannot make her critical observation of the ritual. In most ritual spaces, wisdom is passed on and chiseled into the initiates through symbolism. Matholeni points this out when she argues that these teachings filter into society after the ritual as “the location of unequal space set the tone for the future distribution of unequal spaces and unequal social relationships.”⁴¹

Victor Turner has noted that ritual usually has three phases: separation, liminal and re-integration. Matholeni has mentioned three similar segments of *KwanTojane* ritual stating that, “The *intonjane* ceremony (the initiation school for girls) has three segments, namely: *umngeno* (joining), *umtshatiso wentonjane* (slaughter of a cow), and the final stage, *umgidi* (welcoming home ceremony).”⁴² The slaughter of the cow segment is that liminal space where the initiate has transcended the binaries of gender, age and is almost undefined. According to Turner, the significant phase in the ritual is the liminal as it is the process to lay a foundation for balancing of relationships in society. For Turner, liminal is a “stage of being between phases” as the individuals in this phase are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between.⁴³ During the liminal phase Chammah Kaunda⁴⁴ argues that

⁴⁰ Mulenga Kaunda, “Negotiated Feminism? 89.

⁴¹ Matholeni, “KwaNtojane: The Indigenous rites of Passage,” 8.

⁴² Matholeni, “KwaNtojane: The Indigenous Rites of Passage,” 8.

⁴³ Taylor, *The Ritual Process*, 151.

⁴⁴ Chammah Kaunda, ‘Ndembu Cultural Liminality, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Reconceptualising Zambian Pentecostalism as Liminal spaces,’ *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 3718. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.3718>

The *communitas* of liminal subjects was embedded in radical equality and genderlessness. The liminal subjects, therefore, were regarded as neither males nor females and not transgendered but ungendered pure spirits. They could function with any gender but remain ungendered and undefined.

Ritual spaces have coded activities that may seem one thing to the observer and mean something different for those who are initiated and those being initiated. *KwaNtojane* initiates may seem powerless and weak to the observer, but it might actually mean different empowering messages for the initiate. In the liminal phase which is their formative phase, initiates have power to be and do what they could not do previously if the argument from Chammah Kaunda above is critically understood. The liminal stage is where initiates are empowered and given agency. In ritual spaces often the novice/s are taught to pay attention because everything that happens in the space is important. The dancing, singing, silence, beating of drums all signify something important. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians⁴⁵ have continued to argue that there is a possibility to salvage life-giving aspects of culture as well as reject life denying aspects, especially as they relate to African women.

The next is Mukuka's chapter which sought to demonstrate that the wives of *bashi Cingo* are forbidden from going to farm during the times when their spouses are performing rituals on the dead chiefs' bodies because they may contaminate the land. "*Bashi Cingo* are men who are assigned to preserve the bodies of some Bemba chiefs when they die"⁴⁶ or simply put, they are royal embalmers. Megan Vaughan⁴⁷ says that "Bemba belie(ve) in the supernatural powers of their chiefs." This means when a chief dies,

⁴⁵ Apawo and Nadar, "What's in a Name? 5-24. See also Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 19.

⁴⁶ Mukuka Bridget Masaiti, "Bemba Rituals and the Environment: Experiences of the Wives of *Bashi Cingo* in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church" in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press), 19-37.

⁴⁷ Megan Vaughan, "Divine Kings: Sex, Death and Anthropology in Inter-War East/Central Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 49 no.3 (2008):383-401, 384.

bashi Cingo and their wives leave their home to be near the mourning site so that they can perform rituals. Sometimes it takes one year before a chief can be buried. So *bashi Cingo* and their wives stay away from their homes and work for that period. Those directly in contact with the corpse of the chief are *bashi Cingo* (men) and it is indeed noticeable that the women (*bashi Cingo*'s wives) who are not in contact with the corpse are the ones that are not allowed to go to the farm. *Bashi Cingo* will gather food from the farm and their wives would cook it. What Mukuka has not explained is whether there are rituals between *bashi Cingo* and their wives or just the wives' rituals that are deemed able to contaminate the land. It has been argued that Bemba women were very industrious women especially with farming and they were admired by their neighbouring villages.⁴⁸ 'The death of the founder'⁴⁹ should have been a paragraph within the background of Sweetheart church so that Mukuka could focus more on the rituals of *bashi Cingo* and its effect on their wives. African rites of passage often work with fear. *Bashi Cingo* have to perform rituals to keep themselves in line with the work they are required to do as they keep kings and chiefs' corpses. Apart from stating that *bashi Cingo* preserve the kings' corpses until burial, this chapter would have done justice if it had demonstrated and elaborated on how the corpses are preserved and what is required of *bashi Cingo* during the embalming period. This information would have given a glimpse into why *bashi Cingo* and their wives are separated from their communities while they embalm the chiefs' corpse or why their wives should in fact accompany them at all. Sometimes there are sex rituals that need to be performed during funerals for instance as Vaughan⁵⁰ has argued.

In the next chapter on rites, according to Fidelis Nkomazana, indigenous beliefs are slowly waning but people still desire that certain aspects of their

⁴⁸ Karla Poewe, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia*. (New York: Academic Press, 1981) And Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony*, 26.

⁴⁹ Masaiti, "Bemba Rituals and the Environment," 26.

⁵⁰ Vaughan, "Divine Kings: Sex, Death," 401.

everyday life be connected to their indigenous beliefs. This desire could be leveraged as a way of continuing with aspects of African cultural beliefs. African women theologians⁵¹ have consistently argued for leveraging aspects of African culture that are life-giving like African women's ecological way of life. It would have been remarkable if Nkomazana explicitly inserted 'sacred sites/places' in the title of her chapter as well as positioning the objectives of the study within the introduction of the chapter. Part of the reason why rites are seemingly waning is Christianity. Elsewhere, I have argued using empirical research that African Pentecostal women have selected aspects of the culture and ritual that they have removed because they believe certain aspects are outdated or purely demonic, and certain aspects that they choose to keep as they align with the word of God.⁵² While Pentecostal women have redefined rites, rituals and culture to fit their context, they have also held onto some colonial perceptions of African culture as being demonic. Nevertheless, they have opened up discussion for redefining culture, rites and rituals, which means that rite, ritual and culture is fluid not static and one can extract aspects that fit well with their context.

Abednico Phili's chapter on the effects of urbanization on traditional mourning rituals in Southern Africa sheds some light on the impact and transformation that results from encounter between two or more cultures. Most African rituals have metamorphosed due to various reasons from intercultural interactions to modernity and technology. Most of these ritual metamorphoses are always negative and often impact negatively on women than men.

Culture is fluid and never static⁵³, it continues to change. From dress code to who cries loudest these had meaning for African funeral rituals. This

⁵¹ Apawo and Nadar, "What's in a Name?" 7.

⁵² Mulenga-Kaunda "Negotiated Feminism?" 216.

⁵³ Apawo and Nadar, "Treading Softly but Firmly: African Women, Religion, and Health" in African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa

chapter would have enlightened and added much to the body of knowledge on funeral rituals and traditional mourning if the author had delved into changes that have come about in the burial rituals of married women, and touched upon the question of whether the rituals become more oppressive for women or to what extent they have been redeemed if at all? Phili however, has noted that “Some married women I interviewed pointed out that they had relocated to towns and they wish to be buried there. Others reasoned that they have worked hard and attained a high socio-economic status for themselves and, as such, have bought pieces of land at Phomolong in the Phakalane estates, where they will be buried.” It appears that there is social change that is happening and yet, women can only exercise their agency in choosing a burial place in any place but their own natal homes.

The ritual discussion in the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa* enters the ritual debate nuancing the current conversations. The authors broadly discussed rituals in rural and urban areas. This makes the discussion rich as it does not focus only on rural women or squarely on urban women. Both spaces are engaged, mediating both rural and urban women’s voices. Within the broad ritual debate, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa* has not engaged explicitly with ritual as a public ritual. The focus has been on the unjust and oppressive aspects of ritual toward women.

Concluding Remarks

Mother Earth, Mother Africa contains chapters that have overtly argued that missionaries assumed the superiority of European ways of life and sought to extend these to the indigenous people thereby illegalizing and criminalizing specific ways of indigenous living and practices. There are deep set hierarchies of power and patriarchy that order people’s lives. Even before we talk about rights, institutions and laws, we need to understand rights as a way of belonging and dignity.

Oduyoye ed Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Sarojini Nadar, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2006), 1-13, 5.

My impression is that the chapters have not engaged scientific aspects of Africans – African women in particular. Two chapters by Macloud Sipeyiye and Doreen Karimi Nyaga have tried to engage with technology but ended up describing the challenge of technology as contributing to the replacing of indigenous ways of engaging with religion and environment.

When two worldviews collide, there is an inevitable change that should occur. That change of course does not always have to be negative. Can science, ritual and religion share a space? We are faced with artificial intelligence and, as religious people, we need to engage with AI critically in order to be relevant. This depiction of African women as highly religious has led to the perception of African women as irrational. This representation has not engaged with the fact that there are many African women that have moved past religiosity and are engaging life without their entire focus on religion. Women who engage in everyday life without focusing or depending on religious worldviews would have been necessary to include in such conversations.

African women's agency is minimized due to the gloomy representation of their ritual involvement. Nnaemeka highlights that "African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiation and compromise."⁵⁴ Women's agency is present in subtle ways in ritual as African feminism "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines."⁵⁵ Colonial religions have negatively impacted women and have been a source of much oppression for women but in most indigenous religions, women held strategic positions of power.

How we represent ourselves as African women is important. The four ritual chapters in the book demonstrates the necessity to engage liberative methodologies and approaches in order to understand the indigenous

⁵⁴ Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism" 377.

⁵⁵ Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism" 353.

rituals especially those ritual aspects that cannot easily be seen by observers. Certain rituals show gender swaps in the liminal as resistance and counteraction against inequalities. Oduyoye in the preface succinctly explains “The reference to Mother Earth in the title recalls the picture of Earth as a woman exploited and expected to be silent, just as colonial Africa was seen by both Africanists and colonialists.” The authors in this book have given voice to the agency that African women in indigenous religious ritual spaces hold and leverage it to show women’s agency.

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