From "Imperial Maternalism" to "Matri-centrism:" Mothering Ethics in Christian Women's Voluntarism in Kenya

Eleanor Tiplady Higgs[1]

[1]SHORT BIO
Eleanor Tiplady Higgs is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town. Her interests centre on the study of gender and sexuality within Christianity, narrative identity, and feminist ethics.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town; eleanor.higgs@uct.ac.za

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0733-2924

ABSTRACT
In this article I review some contributions to "mothering ethics" in African feminist religious studies and African gender theory, to examine whether recent and historical practices in Kenyan Christian women's voluntarism constitute forms of ethical "mothering." I show that the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Mothers' Union (MU) in Kenya have a history of "imperial maternalism," which highlights that mothering is a set of practices marked by imbalances of power. The social interventions of the YWCA and MU demonstrate that the social and religious authority of "mother" has provided a route through which African Christian women can assert authority in politics and social life. I suggest that this is because mothering is a useful metaphor through which Kenyan Christian women at the YWCA and MU express a relational, caring ethic that has the potential to avoid the problem of essentialism.

KEYWORDS
Christianity; ethics; gender; imperialism; Kenya; mothering

Introduction

Mothering, reproductive justice, women's caring labour, and gender essentialism remain vitally relevant topics for feminists theorising about religion and ethics.[1] In the Western Anglophone theory, the idea of an ethics based on women's experiences of mothering was popularised in the work of Sara Ruddick and other care ethicists, often drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan.[2] Many critical feminist responses to this body of

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1   This is evident in recent gender studies, for example Christianne Collantes, *Reproductive Dilemmas in Metro Manila: Faith, Intimacies, and Globalization* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Eliza Getman and Sarojini Nadar, "Natality and Motherism: Embodiment Within Praxis of Spiritual Leadership," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no.2 (2013): 59-73; Margaret Kamitsuka, "Unwanted Pregnancy, Abortion, and Maternal Authority: A Prochoice Theological Argument," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no.2 (2018): 41-57; Dawn Llewellyn, "Maternal Silences: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity," *Religion and Gender* 6, no.1 (2016): 64-79; Tushabe wa Tushabe, "Memoirs of Motherhood: Reflections on Pedagogical Motherhood in Community," *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 23 (2013): 11-31.

2   Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,

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work question whether a focus on mothers can be reconciled with an anti-essentialist understanding of gender. It is widely recognised in feminist theory and practice that caring for children, elders, unwell, and disabled people is labour that has been under-valued. However, this insight is weighed carefully against the reductive stereotype of women as "naturally" nurturing. In other words, feminists recognise that "women" and "mothers" are distinct but overlapping categories, while many still wonder if "maternal thinking" can be part of feminist ethics and politics. These questions become more pressing when considering the heightened relevance of the mother-figure in Christianity and its usage to legitimise heteropatriarchal definitions of gender.[3] Christian women have come together under the banner of "mothers" both because it has value for them, and because they have been denied other social roles. The Mothers' Union (MU) is an example of this for many Anglican women, and its continuing popularity is testament to the relevance of a specifically religious subjectivity in African contexts, although its membership dwindles in the United Kingdom.[4]

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and MU in Kenya are examples of Christian women's voluntarism: they are both membership organisations that work towards social transformation with a focus on women, youth, and children. I argue that the existence of the YWCA and MU rests partly on women's ability to exercise power from their social positions as mothers. The values and politics of the YWCA and MU have not often been studied, but I suggest that many of their activities may reflect the maternal authority offered by "imperial maternalism" in colonial women's movements. This has blended in complex ways with some African conceptual frameworks, to which I refer in this essay with the broad term "matricentrism:" the organisation of

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1984); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989).

[3]   Heteropatriarchy is defined by Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill as "the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent" ("Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no.1 [2013]: 13).

[4]   Abby Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: The Last Active Anglican Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation 1876-2008* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); Deborah Gaitskell, "Crossing Boundaries, and Building Bridges: The Anglican Women's Fellowship in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no.3 (2004): 266-97.

society and moral values around mothers and mothering. The number of people involved in the YWCA and MU underlines their significance in the context of the contemporary Kenyan women's movement. Worldwide, the MU reports a membership of approximately four million,[5] while the YWCA claims to "indirectly influence 13.6 million women" through its work.[6] Within Kenya, the MU has branches in all 32 dioceses of the Anglican Church, and in 2018, its membership was an estimated 450,000,[7] while the YWCA counts approximately 26,000 members across its seven branches.[8] These membership numbers do not account for the beneficiaries of the development and welfare projects these organisations conduct. Thus, in terms of membership numbers and the relative lack of other avenues for women to take up leadership positions in Christian institutions, the significance of the YWCA and MU is in no doubt. With reference to these organisations, I review some African contributions to mothering ethics in feminist religious studies and gender theory, to examine whether recent and historical practices in Kenyan Christian women's voluntarism constitute forms of ethical "mothering."

Imperial Maternalism

Mothering has a historical significance in Kenya through the association of Christian voluntary service with middle-class white womanhood during the colonial period (1885-1963). Power differentials were inherent in the relationships within the YWCA and MU and with the beneficiaries of their work. These two groups are voluntary membership organisations of and for Christian women, each of which was established in Britain in the mid-19th century.[9] They spread across the globe through missionary activity and the British Empire and have grown to become worldwide institutions. A group of 15 British women established the Kenya YWCA in Nairobi in 1912,[10] while the wife of a colonial official in central Kenya founded the

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5   Mothers' Union, "Our Vision," 2013, https://www.mothersunion.org/our-vision/.
6   World YWCA, "Annual Report 2016," 2018. https://www.worldywca.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/annualreport2016-v7.pdf.
7   Mothers' Union, "Where we Work: Kenya," 2018, http://www.mothersunion.org/about-us/where-we-work/worldwide/kenya/.
8   Eleanor T. Higgs, "Narrating Christianity, Living "Fulfilled Lives:" The Young Women's Christian Association in Kenya, 1912-2012" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2017).
9   Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*; Carole Seymour-Jones, *Journey of Faith: The History of the World YWCA* (London: Allison & Busby, 1994).
10 Vera Harley, *Rickshaw to Jets: A History and Anecdotes of the Kenya YWCA, 1912-1965* (London: Self-published, 1995).

first Kenyan branch of the MU in 1918.[11] Typical of that historical period, the YWCA and MU were both racially exclusive organisations, admitting only white women as members until the mid-1950s.[12] In Kenya and Britain, both organisations institutionalised a social hierarchy that placed middle-class, middle-aged, white women in positions of authority over women of colour, impoverished women, and working women. The YWCA began its work in Britain to protect young single women from the perceived moral threats of the city.[13] It also offered an avenue for married, middle-class women to exercise their Christian duty to safe-guard society's moral and spiritual well-being. For this highly circum-scribed group of women, a degree of social influence and some positions of authority were accessible through their social roles as mothers.[14]

Just as there is no universal category of "women," there is no universal category of "mothers." The historical development of the YWCA and MU in the context of colonised Kenya reveals the extent to which the social position of "mother" was differentiated by power. It illustrates "imperial maternalism," or the instrumentalisation of motherhood in articulation with racism and colonialism.[15] The YWCA, MU, and other colonial women's organisations acted from imperial maternalism in their characteristically forceful promotion of Victorian Christian social norms. Colonial and racist definitions of whiteness and Africanness as opposite in nature and value, allowed colonisers to define themselves as superior to African women by defining the latter as morally and culturally

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[11]   Galia Sabar-Friedman, "The Power of the Familiar: Everyday Practices in the Anglican Church of Kenya," *Journal of Church and State* 38, no.2 (1996): 386, n.32.

[12]   Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen*, 109; Galia Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya: From Mediation to Opposition 1963-1993* (New York: Frank Cass, 2002), 56.

[13]   Seymour-Jones, *Journey of Faith,* 2-4.

[14]   Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*, 151; Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992), 38, 67; Angela Woollacott, "From Moral to Professional Authority: Secularism, Social Work, and Middle-Class Women's Self-Construction in World War I Britain," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no.2 (1998): 86-90.

[15]   For a discussion on the concept of "maternalism," see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920," *American Historical Review* 95, no.4 (1990): 1076-108; Rebecca J. Plant and Marian van der Klein, "A New Generation of Scholars on Maternalism," in *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century,* eds. Marian van der Klein, Rebecca J. Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1-21.

"lacking."[16] The British Christian colonisation of Kenya simultaneously reduced women's authority and sharpened distinctions between public space and the private, domestic sphere of the home, in relation to which mothers and their caring labour were defined.[17] The YWCA and MU contributed to this construction through their education of girls and women in literacy and domestic skills like sewing, cooking, and childcare.[18] These phenomena were part of wider attempts to regulate women's conduct with/in a colonial, legal, economic, and social apparatus by containing them in the home.[19]

Imperial maternalism is not only imperialism achieved through women identified with motherhood; it is also imperialist interventions in mothering practices. Missionaries' Christian education for girls elided the social roles of woman, wife, and mother, and the home was reconstituted as the domain of this newly (re)gendered figure. Colonial women's groups' promotion of the cult of domesticity targeted "African" mothering practices for intervention to change the living standards of Africans in accordance with middle-class British norms and expectations. These socio-cultural interventions complemented colonial authorities' interventions, such as the medicalisation of childbirth through the introduction of maternity hospitals.[20] Thereby, not only were African mothering practices subjected to criticism, but wider family structures were transformed. Such interventions have motivated postcolonial projects to recuperate African understandings of motherhood.

Since the Kenyan independence, the utility of the social position of "mother" has been reflected in Kenyan women's political activism.[21] The internal hierarchies that characterised the YWCA and MU in the colonial period persisted, as more urban, middle-class, and educated women took up leadership positions, while the beneficiaries of their work remained poorer, more rural, and less educated. Much of the work

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16 Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 242.
17 Elizabeth Francis, "Migration and Changing Divisions of Labour: Gender Relations and Economic Change in Koguta, Western Kenya," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 65, no.2 (1995): 206-7.
18 Harley, *Rickshaws to Jets*; Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50* (London: James Currey, 2005): 205-8.
19 Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 9-10.
20 Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 169-73.
21 Wangari M. Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (London: William Heinemann 2008), 220-1; Alexandra Tibbetts, "Mamas Fighting for Freedom in Kenya," *Africa Today* 41, no.4 (1994): 31-2.

undertaken under the auspices of these organisations since independence has been a continuation of the programmes that had been initiated in the colonial period: providing vocational training, classes in literacy and nutrition, youth groups, and nursery schools.[22] In Christian organisations and church institutions in Kenya, women and mothers are paradoxically recognised as powerful, but systemically denied opportunities to exercise that power. Despite the fact that many churches in Kenya now ordain women, and congregations largely consist of women, men dominate the institutional hierarchy of clergy, management, and leadership positions.[23] It is well-known that the exclusion of women from positions of leadership and power within church institutions across the world has been justified partly by considering priesthood incompatible with motherhood and the range of bodily functions that biological mothers typically experience, including menstruation and breastfeeding.[24]

In the context of such exclusions, the YWCA, MU, and similar organisations like churchwomen's guilds, are a significant avenue through which Christian women take up positions of authority and leadership parallel to the church, both at local and national level.[25] However, these Christian women's organisations do not necessarily operate independently of clergy, nor do they always oppose the heteropatriarchy of the churches to which they belong.[26] Esther Mombo has critiqued the MU's poor track record of responding to domestic abuse, noting that the organisation has been known to encourage women to endure abuse rather than "rebel against their husbands," reflecting an attitude towards marriage that does not serve women.[27]

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[22] Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya,* 96-9, 107-20.

[23] Ruth M. James, "Women's Participation in Church-Based Organizations," in *Quests for Integrity in Africa,* eds. Grace Wamue and Mathew M. Theuri (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), 162-3; Esther Mombo, "The Ordination of Women in Africa: A Historical Perspective," in *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*, eds. Ian Jones, Kirsty Thorpe, and Janet Wootton (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 123-43.

[24] Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 59-60.

[25] James, "Women's Participation;" Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra: Legon Theological Studies, 2000).

[26] Erica Appelros, "Gender within Christian Fundamentalism: A Philosophical Analysis of Conceptual Oppression," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 75, no.5 (2014), 460-73.

[27] Esther Mombo, "Resisting Vumilia Theology: The Church and Violence Against Women in Kenya," in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion,* eds. Andrew Wingate, Kevin Ward, Carrie Pemberton, and Wilson Sitshebo (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 1998), 221-2.

Neither the YWCA nor the MU was established as a campaigning organisation, or to include African women. As social platforms for pious, middle-class women, they promoted the institution and sacrament of Christian marriage, the ideal of the nuclear family, and protected young women from the dangers of the urban environment.[28] It is therefore interesting to observe the extent to which these organisations have reinforced or undermined heteropatriarchal gender norms in their more recent work under the leadership of Kenyan women.

"Mothering" in the HIV Epidemic

Since the 1980s, the institutionalised maternalism of the YWCA and MU has worked in parallel with the paternalism of international development interventions. As described above, the MU exists in part to promote and support marriage, within which a woman's role as wife and mother is understood to be divinely mandated. This continues to inform the focal points of the MU's programmes: education and care for children, teenagers, and young women, skills classes, opposing early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), sex work, and visiting hospital patients.[29] Since the 1990s, both the YWCA and MU have additionally sought to respond to the HIV epidemic. The first case of HIV in Kenya is thought to have occurred in 1984, and until 1999 the majority of HIV-related work was carried out by churches and NGOs.[30] The extreme risk posed by HIV to children, young people, and future generations, made it a focus point for Christian women's voluntarism and their expression of mothering ethics.

The YWCA incorporates HIV in its programmes addressing women's and young people's sexual and reproductive health and economic empowerment projects, while they are against FGM.[31] The focus of the YWCA's programmes is largely on educating adolescents and young adults in schools, churches and youth clubs about sex and relationships, with the

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[28] Caitriona Beaumont, Moral Dilemmas and Women's Rights: The Attitude of the Mothers' Union and Catholic Women's League to Divorce, Birth Control and Abortion in England, 1928-1939, *Women's History Review* 16, no. 4 (2007): 463-85; Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*; Woollacott, "From Moral to Professional Authority."

[29] Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya.*

[30] Karen Booth, *Local Women, Global Science: Fighting AIDS in Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Elsa Ouko, "Christian Ethics and HIV/AIDS in Kenya," in *Christian Ethics and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, eds. James N. Amanze, Fidelis Nkomazara, and Obed N. Kealotswe (Gaborone: Bay Publishing, 2007), 87.

[31] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 141-50.

emphasis being on how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, and HIV infection. When it comes to older adolescents and adults, the use of contraception is promoted, with demonstrations of how condoms should be used, and the occasional distribution of free samples.[32] Condoms are suspect within the hegemonic Christian sexual ethics in Kenya, which makes the YWCA's cautious promotion of them somewhat unusual.

From the prevailing pronatal perspective of the Kenyan Christianity, the prophylactic use of condoms is problematic. In order to conceive, condom use must be abandoned, which means one or both partners must risk HIV transmission or reinfection. The YWCA prioritises protecting young people from contracting HIV over the hegemonic Christian sexual ethics that would deny the use of condoms on the basis of their contraceptive effect. Meanwhile it discourages abortion for a range of theological and pragmatic reasons.[33] The YWCA's approach to reproductive health is complex, because the reality of HIV transmission makes becoming a mother even riskier than it already is. The specifically Christian interest of these organisations in promoting and valuing motherhood and mothering takes into account the high rates of maternal mortality and lack of access to maternal healthcare for impoverished women. The Christian mothering ethics of the YWCA seeks to protect young women (and men) from HIV transmission in a context where becoming a mother is both central to the good life, and a life-threatening risk.[34]

Meanwhile, the MU's care for orphans and other vulnerable children focuses on providing food, medical care, and sometimes a place to live, in a context marked by the absence of well-resourced public social services. Orphans are fed, medically treated, and offered weekend classes in literacy and numeracy. The MU in the Diocese of Mount Kenya South describes its work as providing "shelter, love and education" for children orphaned by AIDS.[35] The provision of care to those suffering with HIV-related diseases and their dependents is usually the responsibility of women, meaning that the overall consequences of

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[32] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 175-6.
[33] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity,* 177-9.
[34] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity,* 182-3; 254-5.
[35] Mothers' Mercy Home, "Our History," n.d., http://www.mothersmercyhome.co.ke/ ?page_ id=169/.

the HIV epidemic disproportionately affect women.[36] Since the MU is constituted mainly by women, its care for orphans conforms somewhat to this tendency. However, by addressing the care of orphans on a larger scale, the MU expands definitions of motherhood to publicly, collectively "mother" orphaned children. The relegation of HIV to the private realm, and AIDS to the hospital bed, is reflected in the pervasive stigma and silence surrounding the illness.[37] The work of the YWCA and MU breaks the silence. By maintaining that provision for the survival and welfare of children orphaned by AIDS is a collective responsibility of the wider community, the MU takes some of this labour which would otherwise be shouldered by women in the extended family who are already likely to perform many other types of unpaid care work.

Both the YWCA and MU pursue social transformation by leveraging the status that biological and social motherhood grants to women. Both organisations act on mothering ethics in their activities, and often draw on their members' experiences as parents to inform their work.[38] This stands in continuity with their histories of imperial maternalism, as the YWCA and MU staff are usually middle-class, middle-aged, married mothers. While their work with children, youths, and women in the context of the HIV epidemic seems to resist the public/private split and complicate essentialist definitions of mothering, both organisations remain unable or unwilling – explicitly or consistently – to challenge the heteropatriarchy, repronormativity, and essentialism that inflect Christian understandings of mothering.[39] However, these are not the only conceptual or cultural resources on which African Christian women may draw to construct a mothering ethics.

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[36] Nyokabi Kamau, *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender: Experiences of Women in Kenyan Universities* (Eldoret: Zapf Chancery, 2009); Nyambura Njoroge, *Gender Justice, Ministry, and Healing: A Christian Response to the HIV Pandemic* (London: Progressio, 2009), 6-8.

[37] Kamau, *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender*, 193.

[38] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 177.

[39] The concept of "repronormativity" is not used by the African theorists discussed here. It names the uncritical gendered and heteronormative expectation that sexually mature people are capable of reproducing, and that they want to have children. See, for example, Jennifer Denbow, "Sterilization as Cyborg Performance: Reproductive Freedom and the Regulation of Sterilization," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no.1 (2014): 108.

African Motherhood in Postcolonial Kenya

Oyèrónké Oyĕwùmí contrasts the centrality of mothers in the West African Yorùbá culture and in Yorùbá women's lives, with a Western feminism's aversion to mothers.[40] At least since Simone de Beauvoir's observation that patriarchal cultures associate women with motherhood so closely as to believe that "woman is womb," many (though certainly not all) Western feminists have critiqued the gendered limitations that motherhood has imposed on their lives and downplayed maternal experience as a source of moral wisdom.[41] However, many Western feminist ethicists and philosophers have positively valued mothering, often tracing their origins to the definitive writings of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and/or Carol Gilligan.[42] The ambivalence that characterises many feminist readings and uses of motherhood is arguably a result of Western feminism's focus on the situation of the middle-class white wife-and-mother, which excludes the different experiences of women and mothers in other class and cultural contexts. So, while the Western Anglophone gender theory does have a tense relationship with motherhood, it is more varied than Oyĕwùmí suggests.[43] Oyĕwùmí's analysis is entirely correct when she identifies the conceptual frameworks that have informed white-Western Christian-ities and feminisms, which led many scholars, missionaries, colonial officials, and development professionals to assume that to be a woman, wife, and mother is naturally coherent and universal.[44]

In contrast, African gender theorists have unsettled the fundamental association of motherhood with women that has been promoted as

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40 Oyèrónké Oyĕwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 211-20; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: Norton, 1995).

41 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), xli; Margaret U. Walker, "Moral Understandings: Alternative 'Epistemology' for a Feminist Ethics," *Hypatia* 4, no.2 (1989): 16.

42 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1978); Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*; Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

43 Agnes A. Apusigah, "Is Gender yet Another Colonial Project? A Critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's Proposal," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* 20 (2008): 37-8.

44 Ifi Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy in Africa: Kinship Ideologies and Systems in Africa and Europe," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader,* ed. Oyeronke Oyĕwùmí (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 92; Cherryl Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no.3 (1995): 431.

"natural" in European social formations.[45] African political deployments of the lessons and values of mothering and motherhood have been theorised under the titles "matriarchy,"[46] "matrifocality,"[47] and recently, "matripotency,"[48] to which I refer collectively as "matricentrism." Although these theorists' contributions should not be presumed to offer the same understanding of gender or mothering, they are similar in that they are based on the claim that the social position of mothers in many precolonial African cultures was one marked by authority and power. The social power of mothers is what Oyěwùmí has more recently called *matripotency*, the "supremacy of motherhood."[49] Famously, Oyěwùmí argues that in the Yorùbá society, the imposition of a British, Christian gender regime through colonisation, redefined mothers as women, substantially modifying the ungendered precolonial "motherhood" category of *iya*. The colonial introduction of a binary definition of gender changed the meaning of kinship terms and reduced *iya*, formerly "the most consequential category in social, political and spiritual organisa-tion," to the domestic ideal of woman, wife, and mother.[50] Similarly, Ifi Amadiume claims that many pre-colonial African societies traced their family lineage through the mother, and focused on the leadership of mothers in matriarchal formations.[51] Additionally, she argues that there

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45 Catherine Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa, 1995); 'Jìmí O. Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality: Endogeneity and African Gender Scholarship," *African Sociological Review* 14, no.1 (2010): 2-19; Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London: Zed, 1997); Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1988); Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy;" Mary Kolawole, "Recon-ceptualizing African Gender Theory: Feminism, Womanism and the *Arere* Metaphor", in *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa,* ed. Signe Arnfred (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2006), 251-66; Obioma Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1997); Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemo-logies," *Signs* 25, no.4 (2000): 1093-8; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

46 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Victoria Inyang-Talbot, "Who Pounds the Yam? Perspectives on the 'New Matriarchy,'" *Journal of Pan African Studies*, no.16 (2018): 16.

47 Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality."

48 Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

49 Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, 2.

50 Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 47; Oyěwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds," 1093-8.

51 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 156; Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 88.

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was no clear masculine public/feminine domestic divide, and therefore, if there was a gender division of labour, it followed a different logic.[52]

Oyĕwùmí's claims are specific to the Yorùbá culture and therefore do not necessarily apply elsewhere on the African continent. Indeed, her findings have been contested by other gender theorists familiar with the Yorùbá society.[53] What is relevant here is that colonisation changed the value and status of mothers, which may be considered similar to the situation in Kenya, because both contexts bear witness to the attitudes of British colonisers and the cultural norms they imported. The existence of African cultural resources which emphasise the power and centrality of mothers, and the possibility of defining motherhood without requiring a binary definition of gender or sex, are highly relevant for those worried about essentialism in mothering ethics. The central theme in these historical and theoretical considerations of African gender and mother-hood is that mothers, as women, have had their power usurped. To the extent that Anglophone gender theories and feminist activism disengage from (African) mothering as a source of insight, they risk siding with imperial maternalism.

Matricentric African Ethics

My interest is not to claim that before colonisation, certain African societies were matriarchal. Rather, I am interested in a further conclusion that Amadiume and others draw out of their arguments for precolonial matriarchies, namely, that the value systems of precolonial Africa were fundamentally informed by mother-centred customs – that ethics and norms were "matricentric."[54] At least two points emerge as critical in considering this possibility: first, the content and implications of the matricentric ethics identified, and second, whether it is significant that mothering and/or mothers are the source of its insight, authority, and application. In answer to the first point, I suggest that three theoretical insights for mothering ethics emerge from the foregoing discussion: (i) the recuperation of cultural resources which emphasise the power and

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[52] Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality," 11; Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 90.

[53] Apusigah, "Is Gender Yet Another Colonial Project?;" Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "'Yorubas don't do Gender:' A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*," in *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*, eds. Signe Arnfred, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Esther W. Kisiang'ani, Desiree Lewis, Oyèrónké Oyĕwùmí, and Filomena Chioma Steady (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004), 61-81.

[54] Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 29.

centrality of mothers; (ii) an anti-essentialist definition of motherhood without reference to a binary definition of gender or sex; and (iii) a politics of prioritising reproductive and caring labour and the people who perform it.

African theorisations of matricentric ethics typically start from a distinction between mothering as an experience and motherhood as a social institution.[55] This distinction is made in acknowledgement of the ways gender unequal social structures actually give low social status to mothers in contemporary African societies, similar to points made elsewhere by Adrienne Rich and Mercy Amba Oduyoye.[56] Mothering as a practice is a source of valuable experiences that generate political and ethical insights as a set of shared concerns among mothers of different social locations. In this vein, "motherism" has been considered an African alternative to feminism. It has continued to be relevant to the dynamics of self-definition within the African gender theory and women's movements, and their relationships with/rejections of Western, imperialist, white feminisms.[57] More recent deployments of motherism were careful to acknowledge that African motherism is not necessarily *anti*-feminist, but it nevertheless poses an implicit challenge to any conceptualisations of feminism that associate mothering with women's subordination.[58] In this view, motherism is a form of activism and resistance based on "solidarity located within the experience of mothering," as was the case in South Africa in the context of anti-apartheid activism.[59]

The idea of mothering as a source of power seems to be applicable to many of the social interventions of Christian women in Kenya, as women in politics and advocacy have drawn on their status as mothers to give

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[55] Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)othering*, 5-6.
[56] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13; Mercy Amba E. Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell,* eds. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105-21.
[57] Acholonu, *Motherism*; Filomena C. Steady, *Women and Collective Action in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 38.
[58] Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 66.
[59] Gertrude Fester, "Women's Organisations in the Western Cape: Vehicles for Gender Struggle or Instruments of Subordination?" *Agenda* 34 (1997): 45-61; Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 66; Shireen Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

them authority as leaders.[60] Beyond the instrumental value for women establishing their social position, the ethical dimension of mothering practices equally provide a rich resource on which to draw. The sanctity of life and the love of mothers for their children have been cited as the foundations for African matricentric ethics, thereby linking the historical centrality of mothers to society, to an underlying veneration of life and those who create it.[61] Under the colonial disruption of this pattern, mothering may have been a way to cultivate hope by nurturing the children who might grow up to overthrow colonial rule.[62] Matricentric ethics is therefore pronatal – forming an interesting parallel with Grace Jantzen's theorisation of "natality"[63] – and centres on compassion for specific others, whose personhood is fundamentally constituted through a relationship with their mother(s) and community.[64] Furthermore, the power of mothers has often been reflected in and legitimised by female deities and divine mothers, particularly in creation myths, suggesting commonality with the Catholic veneration of Mary as the mother of Jesus. [65]

Mothering as Ethical Metaphor

I have suggested here that both the YWCA and MU in Kenya articulate a particular ethical perspective that capitalises on the social status of mothers as it arises specifically in the context of women's movements in

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[60] Faith W. Ngunjiri, "Servant-Leadership and Motherhood: Kenyan Women Finding Fulfillment in Serving Humanity," *Gender, Development, and Globalization Program Working Paper #294* (Center for Gender in Global Context, Michigan State University, 2009), 1-33; Faith W. Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa: Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010); Faith W. Ngunjiri, "'I Am Because We Are:' Exploring Women's Leadership under Ubuntu Worldview," *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 18, no.2 (2016): 226.

[61] Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 94; Ngunjiri, "Servant-Leadership and Mother-hood," 14; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, 74.

[62] Betty Govinden, "Feminism and Decoloniality: Thinking from the South" (Lecture, Decoloniality Summer School, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, 24 January 2019).

[63] Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[64] Acholonu, *Motherism*; Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality;" Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism;" Nduka Otiono, "Catherine Acholonu (1951-2014): The Female Writer as a Goddess," *Nokoko* 4 (2014): 71-2; Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Motherhood*; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

[65] Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Mercy Amba E. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 21-30; Otiono, "Catherine Acholonu."

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postcolonial Kenya. Considering the prevalence of the Christian model of motherhood evident in the work of these organisations in Kenya and in other African contexts, I would like to consider some further implications of African gender theorists' various proposals of mothering as a site for articulating a distinct version of African women's collective political mobilisations under which they can stage interventions in the service of social justice.

Motherism, maternal ethics, and matricentric social movements have tended to presume heterosexuality and make repronormative assumptions that have excluded queer women. The analysis of the YWCA and MU offered herein is not intended to sideline such vitally important concerns about the potential problems presented by mothering ethics. It is certainly true that the YWCA and MU in Kenya show no signs of broadening their heteropatriarchal, institutional practices of mothering. Some practices, like care for orphans, have begun to disassociate Christian matricentric values from any biological definition of the mother. Indeed, other work on the leadership of Christian women in Kenya has emphasised the significance of mothering beyond the confines of biological reproduction.[66] Critiques of matricentrism tend to be based on a conflation of motherhood (as social institution) and mothering (as practice), and in so doing they overextend the valid concern that the essentialism and reification of mothers are politically conservative, regressive, and unable to challenge gender inequality.[67] While it is true that contemporary socio-political trends – such as fundamentalist Christianities – insist on essentialising women as mothers and reifying the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, the YWCA and MU in Kenya demonstrate that this is not necessarily the meaning and usefulness of Christian women's practices of "mothering."

In these examples of African Christian matricentric ethics, mothering is aptly considered a *metaphor* through which ethical values are communicated. Perhaps it expresses a theological anthropology, that is an African Christian understanding of what it means to be human.[68]

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[66] Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa*, 115.

[67] C. Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood," 420-1; Marc Epprecht, "Sexuality, Africa, History," *The American Historical Review* 114, no.5 (2009): 1266.

[68] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 45; Rachel Jones, "Afterword: Giving Voice: The Contested Sites of Motherhood, Religion and Spirituality," *Religion and Gender* 6, no.1 (2016): 112-7.

Mothering practices highlight the fundamental interdependency of our personhood, an understanding of subjectivity as dialogic and co-created in relationships with others. Mothering as a metaphor presents the care-giving labour of mothers as the paradigmatic example of the significance of our relationships, an idea that finds support in the African communitarian philosophy.[69] The metaphor of mothering is meaningful not because women "naturally" understand what it is to bear and/or raise children, but because people live in communities that rely on the care and labour of mothers in multiple ways, and in cultures that tell stories of divine mothers in their mythological origins or religious practices. The idealised mother, caring for a child, represents in an accessible form the value of compassion and the interdependent nature of personhood. Insofar as matricentric ethics can be thought to emerge from the recognition of subjectivity forged in relationship to one's mother, it shares much with African communitarian ethics and the maxim of *Ubuntu*: "I am because we are."[70]

Therefore, the success of the YWCA and MU in Kenya may be explained in part by the extent to which they echo alignments of African matricentric ethics with Western feminist care ethics, and correlate Christian deployments of mothering ethics with aspects of African matricentrism. Relying on mothering and motherhood to provide avenues for women's social activism may be a pragmatic response to the oppor-tunities provided in the Kenyan context. The YWCA and MU recognise that the social position of the "mother" offers opportunities for women to publicly assert their authority. Similarly, to the matricentric values outlined by African gender theorists, these organisations affirm the power and social value of mothers and the performance of caring labour. The theological and spiritual significance of motherhood for many Christian women makes the recuperation and reformation of maternal values an urgent task. However, mothering remains a risky metaphor for ethics, if and when it advocates ideals promoted by explicitly patriarchal Christian institutions.[71] The influence of imperial maternalism on the historical

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[69] Thaddeus Metz, "The Western Ethic of Care or an Afrocommunitarian Ethic? Specifying the Right Relational Morality," *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no.1 (2013): 77-92.

[70] Narnia Bohler-Muller, "Really Listening? Women's Voices and the Ethic of Care in Post-Colonial Africa," *Agenda* 54 (2002): 86-91; Metz, "The Western Ethic of Care?;" Ngunjiri, "I Am Because We Are."

[71] Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advcate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002); Jessica Horn, *Christian Fundamentalisms and Women's*

development of the MU and YWCA suggests that it is only *some* women who are enabled to do things as mothers that they could not do otherwise. While mothering may be an apt ethical metaphor in theory, further research is needed to determine the extent to which either organisation is *deliberately* constructing an African Christian mothering ethics.

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