AFRICAN JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION

Publication Information

Volume 30 No. 1 (2024)

E-ISSN: 2707-2991

Published semi-annually, in July and December, by:

Physical Address:
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice
University of the Western Cape
Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, 7535
Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 21 959 2383
E-mail: dtc@uwc.ac.za / ajgr@uwc.ac.za

The African Journal of Gender and Religion is a **DHET Accredited Journal**

Guest Editors
CL Nash, University of Edinburgh
Carol Marie Webster, Emerson College
Geeta Patel, University of Virginia
✉ misogynoir2mishpat@gmail.com

Editor Emeritus
Isabel Apawo Phiri, World Council of Churches
✉ Isabel.Phiri@wcc-coe.org

Submissions and Managing Editor
Megan Robertson
✉ ajgr@uwc.ac.za

Journal Administrator
Ferial Marlie
✉ dtc@uwc.ac.za

Language Editing, Layout, and Typesetting
Scheherezade Khan
✉ khan.scheherezade@gmail.com

YST Document and Design
✉ ystdesignpros@gmail.com

Peer Reviewers for this Issue:
A double-blind peer review process was conducted by the Special Issue editors.

Editorial Board
Prof. Adriaan van Klinken (Religion and African Studies, University of Leeds)
Prof. Asonzeh Ukah (Department for the Study of Religions, University of Cape Town)
Prof. Aysha Hidayatullah (Islamic studies, University of San Francisco)
Dr. Damaris Parsitau (Religion and Gender Studies, Calvin University)
Dr. Farah Zeb (Independent Scholar, Gender and Islamic Studies)
Assoc Prof. Johnathan Jodamus (Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape)

Assoc Prof. Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans (Religion and Media, Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape)
Prof. Lindsay Clowes (Women's & Gender Studies Department, University of the Western Cape)
Prof. Narnia Bohler-Muller (Human Sciences Research Council, Research Programme on Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery)
Prof. Nina Hoel (Department of Religious Studies, University of Oslo)
Dr. Nontando Hadebe (University of the Free State)
Prof. Rosalind I.J. Hackett (Department of Religious Studies, University of Tennessee)
Dr. Sophia Chirongoma (Department of Religious Studies, Midlands State University)
Prof. Susannah Cornwall (Theology and Religion, University of Exeter)
Right Rev. Dr. Vicentia Kgabe (Practical Theology, College of Transfiguration)
Prof. Zintombizethu Matebeni (South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chair in Sexualities, Genders and Queer Studies, University of Fort Hare)

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION

Volume 30 No. 1 (2024)

E-ISSN: 2707-2991

Article *Pages*

CL Nash, Carol Marie Webster, Geeta Patel
Editorial: Black Women's Radical Religious Epistemologies in Mahogany and Steepled i-xxxi

Ameena Al Rasheed
Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics 1-27

Claudette A. Anderson
"[Obeah] Ọbịa by Igbo Spelling:" Affirming the Value of *After God is Dibịa* by John A. Umeh 28-64

Shandon C. Klein
Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the "Woman Who Was More Than a Man" 65-84

Anna Kasafi Perkins
On/Unstained White dress(es): Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets 85-107

Clementine Nishimwe
Doing Church Differently: Crafting a Church Using the Circle's Theologizing Methodologies in a Xenophobic and Gendered Context 108-132

Book review *Pages*

Raedorah C. Stewart
Nation Women Negotiating Islam: Moving Beyond Boundaries in the Twentieth Century by C. S'thembile West 133-136

NaShieka Knight
Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus by Kenneth N. Ngwa 137-142

Editorial: Black Women's Radical Religious Epistemologies in Mahogany and Steepled Towers

CL Nash[1]

Carol Marie Webster[2]

Geeta Patel[3]

Guest Editors

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/0anp5403

Introduction

The landscape of religious scholarship has often been characterized as one dominated by perspectives that marginalize the voices of minority

---

[1] Dr. CL Nash, a womanist theologian and ethicist, contributes to Pan-Africanism and gender by connecting the religious scholarship of women across the African Diaspora. She directs the Misogynoir to Mishpat Research Network and is a visiting scholar at the University of Edinburgh where she interrogates religious nationalism, historical inflection points in Western Christianity, and its impact on Black, African-descended people. Institutional Affiliation: University of Edinburgh
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8693-0070

[2] Dr. Carol Marie Webster is an artist, womanist, social scientist, and creative entrepreneur whose work focuses on African Diaspora/Black Atlantic women and their communities in the building of a more just and equitable world.
Institutional Affiliation: Emerson College
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9362-8176

[3] Professor Geeta Patel is an interdisciplinary scholar, poet/translator, curator, and writer-activist, with degrees in three sciences, philosophy, and South Asian Studies, who composes academic/popular pieces on the conundrums posed by melding gender, nation/state/colonialism, sexuality, finance, science, media, political economy, religion and aesthetics together, and translates from Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, and Braj.
Institutional Affiliation: University of Virginia
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3099-7094

© Author(s) CC BY NC
ISSN 2707-2991

groups, particularly Black, African-descended women. While the term Black may be expanded to include people who are not African descended in the United Kingdom (UK), the American usage centers on those who are African-descended and share a socio-political location. In this issue, we are using a Pan-African definition of "Black" to reference people whose ancestors are indigenous to the African Continent.[4]

In response to anti-Black exclusionary politics within religious scholarship, the Misogynoir to Mishpat (M2M) Research Network was established to create a safe space for amplifying the religious knowledge production of African-descended women. Since the M2M Research Network was initiated in the UK, the term "African-descended" has been adopted to provide a clearer and unambiguous focus. Throughout this issue, the terms "Black" and "African-descended" are used interchangeably.

Turning to the M2M network as the inspiration and grounding for this special issue of the journal permits us to delve into Black women's non-traditional or "radical" religious epistemologies, exploring how these epistemologies challenge and transform traditional religious scholarship.

The term "radical", in this context, refers to the fundamental and transformative ways in which Black women engage with and reinterpret religious traditions. It is the notion of the radical as transformative that has

[4] See "Pan-Africanism", South African History Online, last edited July 16, 2021, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/pan-africanism#:~:text=In%20its%20narrowest%20interpretation%2C%20Pan,deserves%20notice%20and%20even%20celebration, and also the "History of Pan Africanist Intellectuals," in Peter Kuryla, "Pan-Africanism," *Britannica,* last edited July 17, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism. Both highlight the Pan-African movement that began with Martin Delaney and Alexander Crummel (both African Americans) and Edward Blyden (a West Indian). While it is true that White people also live on the African continent, the goal here is to explore the knowledge production of those whose ancestors were indigenous to the African Continent. Our goal is to recognize and amplify knowledge production, which is often called into question, not based solely on geography, but also through the definition of "Black" imposed by western societies in the form of a binary analysis based on a Black-White dichotomy.

spurred this issue into existence. "Mahogany and Steepled Towers" symbolize the intersection of African heritage ("Mahogany") and established religious institutions ("Steepled Towers"). This special issue highlights the communal faith contexts in which Black women navigate their religious identities and how these contexts foster innovative and liberating theological perspectives.

According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, ethnic and minority groups in the United States (US) make up roughly 9.6% of those earning PhDs in religious scholarship, yet they are hired for only about 1% of professor or lecturer positions. A 2020 analysis by *Inside Higher Education* revealed that institutions largely fail to achieve faculty diversity reflective of their student bodies, with 57% receiving failing grades for Black faculty representation.[5] According to *Inside Higher Education*

When researchers compared Black and Latino faculty representation against student enrollment in 2020, some 57 percent of institutions got F's for Black faculty diversity. Nearly 80 percent failed on Latino faculty diversity. This part of the analysis worked as follows: if an institution had, say, a student population that was 10 percent Black and a faculty body that was 10 percent Black, the institution would be scored 100. The lower the score, the bigger the discrepancy between student and faculty representation.[6]

Despite the long history and contributions of Womanist Theology and Ethics, Black women remain underrepresented in academic positions, both in the US and the UK. For example, it was not until recently that the

5 Colleen Flaherty, "Faculties So White", *Inside Higher Education,* last edited December 1, 2022, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/02/report-finds-faculty-diversity-isnt-meeting-student-needs.

6 Flaherty, "Faculties".

University of Edinburgh appointed its first Black woman theology professor, Selina Stone, starting in autumn 2024.[7]

Historical and Theoretical Context

Black women's religious practices have a rich history shaped by the legacies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade,[8] colonialism and migration to escape genocide, violence against ethnic communities, forced translocation to ensure compliant labor, femicide, and epistemicide. The challenges to epistemicide puts the issue into conversation with philosopher, Michel Foucault, regarding what he would call "subjugated knowledges",[9] which are important for the resulting ongoing struggle for liberation. These religious practices are rooted in communal faith traditions that emphasize collective resilience and spiritual empowerment. Womanist Theology, which emerged in the late 20th century, provides a critical framework for understanding the intersectional identities of Black women.[10]

---

[7] This is a brand-new appointment. At the time of this publication, the University of Edinburgh has not made an official announcement, but the news was informally shared by Stone and members of the faculty at New College. It is a historic appointment of a womanist theologian and an African-descended woman in the study of religion.

[8] We will reference the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the "Slave Trade". We are using the definition of the Slave Trade provided in Thomas Lewis in "The Transatlantic Slave Trade", Britannica, last edited June 17, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade. The article argues that the Slave Trade existed from 1501 to 1867, whereby, 13 million African people were kidnapped and extracted by force and severed from their land, culture, and families. Despite current scholarly assessments of probable numbers, some experts maintain that the number was closer to 30-40 million. See Hilary M. Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd, *Trading Souls: Europe's Transatlantic Trade in Africans* (Kingston/Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2007).

[9] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7. Foucault states that subjugated knowledges refer "to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity". Thus, the contributions in this issue propose and formulate answers to the challenge laid out by Foucault.

[10] The pioneers of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics are Katie Cannon, Delores Williams and Jacquelyn Grant. Delores Williams is credited with the first published use of the word within religious scholarship in 1987. The term "womanish", widely used within African American culture, was the foundation for Alice Walker's term, "womanist".

It integrates postcolonial theory and critical race theory to address the compounded oppressions faced by Black women in religious contexts.

The current academic literature on Black women's religious epistemologies reveals significant gaps. While there is considerable work on Black theology and feminist theology, the unique contributions of Black women's religious perspectives are often overlooked. This special issue aims to fill this gap by foregrounding the voices and experiences of Black women scholars and practitioners.

Womanist scholarship has provided, and continues to provide, a road map for understanding how women might engender understandings of the Divine by seeing God as relevant to and present within their intersectional identities. By using a hermeneutical lens where they grapple with both race/ethnicity and gender, womanism provided a framework for understanding intersectionality in religion throughout the world. Yet, womanism is a decidedly Black, African-descended endeavor. It is decidedly so because it is possible for scholastic allies, who are larger in number, to use womanist discourse to re-center their own perspectives. By creating a space that is set aside for Black women to "breathe", we create possibilities for their scholarship and varied forms of religious leadership, to provide evidence of God's own breath within us, God's ruach.[11]

Theme and Scope of the Issue

The essays in this issue explore the diverse ways in which Black women's religious epistemologies challenge conventional theological narratives. From the African spiritualities of Nigeria and Jamaica to the anti-colonial

Alice Walker coined the term in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983).

[11] The word "ruach" first appears in Genesis 1:2, "…and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters". For more information on the term, "ruach", read Hope Bolinger, "What is the Meaning of the Hebrew Word Ruach", *Christianity Today,* last updated Oct. 14, 2021, https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-the-meaning-of-the-hebrew-word-ruach.html#:~:text=If%20we%20understand%20the%20.

politics of Senegal, Sudan, and South Africa, the contributors offer a rich tapestry of perspectives highlighting the radical nature of Black women's religious knowledge production. Weaving an eclectic spectrum of spiritual practices and beliefs, these essays offer the basis of radical religious epistemologies that enable Black women living under a range of circumstances, in several regions of the world, to find a pathway through the virulence they inhabit within their everyday lives.

What is important to note is that the scholars in this journal issue do not focus solely on women living with the long aftermath of histories of violence emerging out of trans-Atlantic slavery. Rather, to broaden our scope, we have included scholars who speak about women who encounter enormous discrimination, sometimes from groups who ought to have provided them a spiritual home in the places where they came for refuge. Such women often fled violence from various African countries only to settle into racist social and political economies. Or women that have had to traverse Black on Black xenophobia or sexism in societies still beset by the residue of colonialism. The virulence these women face often stems from racism, sexism, and classism, as well as fervor against their specific religious convictions. Despite these challenges, the particularities of their faith-based epistemes provide them with solace, praxes, and insights. These gifts grant them the means, grace, and strength to thrive. In each article the authors, thus, attend carefully to the ways that Black women use a plethora of religious traditions to resist the violence and discrimination they face so that they can reclaim their identities. These scholars braid together elements of African heritage and contemporary social justice movements. Their work demonstrates the transformative power of religion in creating spaces of liberation and empowerment for marginalized communities.

"Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics"

Ameena Al-Rasheed's essay "Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics" investigates the transformation of Sudanese women's identities in the

Diaspora,[12] focusing on their religious practices in West Yorkshire, UK. This essay delves into the interplay between ideologies in new spaces and the identities of Sudanese women as Muslims and African-Arab immigrants, affected by the challenges women face in a world that has entirely different expectations around gender, religion, and race. Al-Rasheed argues that identities are in constant negotiation between the shifting and changing traditions of the homeland and those of the host society. In the process, Al-Rasheed provides an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam, highlighting Sudanese Sufi Islam's role in maintaining cultural traditions amidst the other Islamic discourses that have predominated in the UK.

By tuning into the nexus where rights, representations, and history come together, the essay sheds light on Sudanese women’s perspectives and struggles in the diasporic spaces they inhabit. By exploring the interplay of Africanism, Arabism, and Muslimness/Sufism in their lives, the essay contributes a more nuanced understanding of African Muslim identities through their religious performativities. In the context of West Yorkshire, the encounter between African Sufi Islam and mainstream Islam, in which mosques are configured through particular Middle Eastern/Arab and South Asian lineages, creates unique challenges and opportunities for Sudanese women. Al-Rasheed explores how Sudanese Sufi-Muslim women negotiate their religious and cultural identities in spaces dominated by more these more conservative and masculinist interpretations of Islam. When analyses of women in Islam focus on spaces such as these more conservative ones, their authors have often portrayed women as victims, which then does not allow space for women to lead more radical lives in the context of their religiosity. As Al-Rasheed suggests in her contribution

[12] The terms “the Diaspora” and the “African Diaspora” are used interchangeably as this issue specifically explores the connections between gender, religion, and the African Diaspora, broadly.

Muslim women have often been implicitly characterized as victims of their own culture and religion, and the transformations in their lives are often overlooked or misunderstood when seen solely in terms of Islam. Such perspective undermines women's sound resistance. Cases of women's significant contributions in uprisings against strict religious rules, in Sudan and in Iran are just a few cases in point.

To counter restrictive representations of Muslim women, Al-Rasheed argues that greater attention ought to be paid to spaces, histories, and practices where women are empowered to create strength and value. Al-Rasheed further underscores the significant role of Sufi Islam, rooted in very particular African traditions that have a wider latitude for including women practitioners, lineages, and teachers. In providing a more inclusive and flexible religious framework, these forms of Sufi Islam enable Sudanese women to challenge and navigate the limitations imposed by more purist Islamic practices. Al-Rashid's critical examination of how Sudanese women's religious practices are shaped by and respond specifically to Muslim Diasporas located in the UK then offers readers insights into how to analyze similar Diasporas in the US and in Europe.

Al-Rasheed's essay also probes the assumptions about the radical nature of Black women's religious epistemologies, particularly within the framework of Sufi Islam. By highlighting Sudanese women in the Diaspora, the essay confronts the frequently monolithic representations of Muslim women's experiences that have hitherto often sidelined African women who also understand themselves as Arab. The essay changes what we know about the diverse and complex ways in which religion is lived and practiced. These particularities highlight the intersection of race, gender, and religion, nation, multiple Diasporas in the lives of Sudanese women and give us a unique perspective on the radicality of Black women's religious epistemologies.[13]

[13] The term "intersectionality", coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, identifies the multiple forms of identity that are navigated today. These might include, gender, race/ethnicity, religion,

Furthermore, this essay showcases the way these Sudanese women engage with and transform their religious traditions in response to their diasporic experiences. In the process it brings out several transecting tensions and conflicts, such as those with Black communities that have assumptions about Islam and who are not particularly cognizant of Afro-Arab communities. Others include the conflict with feminist scholars of Islam whose research concentrating on the more patrilinist Sunni Muslim theologies that predominate in the UK is thus not particularly attentive to Sufi lineages that provide enormous latitude for women. Yet another strand encompasses racist White[14] communities that are entirely uninformed about the subtleties of womanist Sufi Afro-Arab heritage.

Al-Rasheed's essay makes a significant contribution to understanding communal faith practices among African Muslim women. By focusing on the lived experiences of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire, the essay brings to the fore the ways in which communal faith practices are maintained by carrying on and nurturing older lineages that were held in the hands of these women, how their practices are transformed in the context of challenges thrown at them by non-Black Muslim communities from other Muslim regions, and thus negotiated in particular diasporic contexts to provide women with newly revitalized strength and resilience. The study of Sufi Islam, with its emphasis on communal and inclusive customs, provides a valuable framework for understanding how African Muslim women create and sustain their religious communities in the face of

---

neurodivergence, and other forms of identity. See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299.

[14] While Black is often capitalized to denote a socio-political location, White is often lowercase. This implies that minoritized groups function within a race and bring a hermeneutical lens that is shaped by race. Yet, by writing "White" in lowercase, it ignores the socio-political power structure assigned to this group. In addition, the lowercase "w" in White also implies neutrality within racial hierarchies. Our approach follows such scholarly groups as The MacArthur Foundation, historian Nell Irvin Painter, and, also, the National Association of Black Journalists.

external challenges. Thus, the essay provides readers valuable insights on the importance of communal faith practices in sustaining cultural identity and providing support and solidarity for African Muslim women in the Diaspora.

Indeed, Al-Rasheed's essay stands out in its approach to decolonizing Western discourses on Islam and Muslim identities. Unlike other essays that may focus on broader theoretical frameworks or more homogeneous representations of Muslim experiences, Al-Rasheed's work provides a nuanced and detailed analysis of a specific community. In the process, it offers a counterpoint to dominant Western discourses that often homogenize Muslim identities and practices, and, in doing so, also homogenize forms of sexism and racism that fold all Black and African communities into each other and evade the complexity of what it means to be Arab and Black. By focusing on the specific context of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire, the essay contributes to a more inclusive and decolonized understanding of Islamic and Muslim identities, providing us an indispensable sightline that recognizes and values the diverse experiences and perspectives of African-Arab Muslim women.

Al-Rasheed's essay fills a significant gap in the literature on African Muslim Diasporas. The experiences of Sudanese women in the Diaspora, particularly in relation to their religious practices, are under-researched and often overlooked in existing studies. By adding detailed and context-specific analyses, Al-Rasheed 's essay provides a valuable in-depth perspective on the literature on African Muslim Diasporas. It brings to view the unique trials and opportunities faced by Sudanese women as they navigate their identities and religious practices in diasporic contexts. The essay also contributes to broader discussions on race, gender, and religion, providing insights that are relevant to scholars and practitioners working in the fields of Diaspora studies, religious studies, and gender studies.

Al-Rasheed’s engagement with Womanist Theology provides a critical framework for understanding the religious epistemologies of Sudanese women in the Diaspora. Womanist Theology, with its emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of Black women, offers essential sightlines into the ways that Sudanese women bring their religion, culture, region, and locale together. Al-Rasheed’s analysis asks us to attend, carefully and rigorously, to the agency and resilience of African Muslim women, querying many prevailing narratives and analyses that often portray them as simply passive or entirely oppressed. By incorporating Womanist Theology, the essay provides a more inclusive and empowering framework for grappling with the religious practices and identities of Sudanese women in the Diaspora. Al-Rasheed demonstrates how Sudanese women navigate their intersecting identities, using their womanist religious practices to assert their agency and challenge the limitations imposed by both what had sometimes transpired at home (where the long lineage of woman-centered faith practices, under pressure from non-Sudanese Muslim communities, occasionally gave way to more masculinist ones) and host societies. This intersectional analysis provides a deeper understanding of how race, gender, and religion interact to shape not just the experiences and identities of African Muslim women in the Diaspora, but, also, their forms of resistance.

This essay contributes to this special issue by bringing what is radical to bear on the question of faith through Sudanese stories. African women’s radical epistemologies, powerful and dynamic though undervalued and unacknowledged by western societies such as the UK, fuel the radical faith of Sudanese women navigating the Diaspora, praying in mosques and churches alike, and honoring their relationship to their religious tradition.

"Ọbịa by Igbo Spelling: Affirming the Value of After God is Dibịa"

Moving onto the exploration of African spiritual practices under slavery, Claudette Anderson’s essay, "[Obeah] Ọbịa by Igbo Spelling: Affirming the Value of After God is Dibịa”, invigorates the centrality of Africana religious

traditions. It reexamines the often misunderstood, devalorized practice of Obeah and redefines it in a positive light. Anderson's piece not only celebrates the historical and cultural significance of Ọbịa but also accentuates its role in countering the negative perceptions that have long plagued African spiritual practices. Anderson uses the framework of John Umeh's scholarship on Igbo faith communities to articulate an authentic Igbo cosmological understanding that positions Ọbịa as a legitimate and invaluable spiritual tradition. [15]

Anderson's essay is significant and relevant, standing as a robust riposte to the marginalization of African spirituality brought to Jamaica by Igbo captives enslaved by the British. It highlights how Ọbịa, often vilified as a form of witchcraft or malevolence, is rooted in a rich tradition of healing and spiritual wisdom. By giving us a view of Ọbịa through an Igbo lens, the essay dismantles Eurocentric misconceptions and affirms the intrinsic worth of African religious practices. Crucial in restoring dignity and respect to African spiritualities that have been undermined by colonial narratives, the essay also offers us another form of reclamation. It centers Igbo faith in the context of Jamaica where the focus has primarily been on Coromantee/Akan from the Gold Coast of Africa, research which has overshadowed the legacy, lineages and strong spirituality of the 250,000 Igbo transported to Jamaica.

The essay's take on Ọbịa underscores its role as an occult spiritual practice that is both healing and empowering, for which Umeh's work, "After God is Dibịa", is instrumental. He presents Ọbịa not merely as a set of rituals but as an embodiment of divine knowledge and wisdom; a sacred science that animates practice and life and marries philosophy, cosmology, literature, music, poetry, technology, and metaphysics. It is a form of complete embodied learning that brings practitioners into a complex harmonic, musical, and sensory balance with all the dimensions of the

[15] John Anenechukwu Umeh, *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area* (Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co. 1999).

universe—the natural, cosmic and human in all their manifestations. Umeh's portrayal of the female Dibịa at the heart of its praxis reclaims the space for women in spiritual leadership, challenging patriarchal structures within religious contexts. These articulations have profound implications for communal and faith-based practices, encouraging a more holistic understanding of spirituality that includes gender inclusivity and the recognition of female Dibịahood.

When compared to other essays on the theme of decolonizing religious discourses, Anderson's work is particularly radical. It does not merely critique colonial disavowal or denigrations of African spirituality, but actively works to reconstruct and reclaim indigenous embodied, somatic, expert practices of knowing and knowledge by unambiguously taking on epistemicide. In one exemplary instance in her essay, Anderson says

When our children ask, "what is *Ọbịa?"* we can now answer with confidence that it is the intellectual tradition of our continental forebears, our very own system of knowledge. When our children ask, "what is *Ọbịa?"* we can teach them that before enslavement and epistemicide the correct question would be, "who is *Ọbịa*?". We can affirm for them that *Ọbịa* is a chosen one who, with knowledge of both positive and negative medicine, practices one or the other.

Anderson's framework also connects with and bolsters other theological approaches, such as Linda Thomas's exploration of womanist epistemology. Thomas indicates, for example, that Womanist Theology's reconstructed knowledge advances "a new epistemology of holistic survival and liberation, a more intentional understanding of reconstructed knowledge processes".[16] To that process of reconstruction, Anderson demonstrates that reconstruction must also be accompanied by or done

[16] Linda Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm", *Crosscurrents* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1998/1999): 488–499.

through recovery, the means by which one can return to that which was stripped away in the knowledge that exists in *Ọbịa.*

Other essays in this issue might address similar themes, but Anderson's use of Umeh's work provides a concrete and delicately explicit framework for understanding the intellectual and spiritual depth of Ọbịa as well as providing future practitioners with a guide and, thus, a venue for recovery. Her descriptions of recovery in these forms, position her essay as pivotal to a much broader conversation about decolonizing religion.

Anderson's exploration of female Dibịahood that gives "birth to being female and free" connects directly to the metaphor of "Mahogany and Steepled Towers". This metaphor symbolizes the strength and resilience of African traditions (mahogany) against the oppressive structures of religious colonialism (steepled towers). The acknowledgment of female Dibịahood, which incorporates holistic living, is constantly in motion. It incessantly journeys and mystically aligns with this metaphor, showcasing how African spiritual practices can withstand and transcend colonial oppression. The inclusion of women as central figures in these practices challenges the male-dominated narratives often associated with religious authority.

The essay's description of recovery also emphasizes the way Ọbịa functions as a radical faith tradition that empowers communities in the present. It argues that the practice of Ọbịa, far from being a relic of the past, is a dynamic and evolving healing, mystical tradition that offers practical and spiritual solutions to contemporary issues. This aspect of the essay highlights the relevance of Ọbịa in today's world, suggesting that it can play a significant role in community healing and empowerment. By presenting Ọbịa as a living tradition, Anderson reinforces its value and potential for future generations.

Moreover, the essay fills significant gaps in the literature on African religious identities and practices. While much has been written about African spiritualities, the specific focus on Ọbịa and its redefinition through

an Igbo perspective is less common. Anderson's work, guided by Umeh's scholarship, provides a nuanced angle that is often missing in mainstream discussions on the topic. By doing so, it not only enriches academic conversations but also serves as a vital resource for those within the African Diaspora seeking to reconnect with their spiritual heritage.

Furthermore, Anderson's essay can be read alongside other works on empowerment and resistance through religious practices. For instance, it echoes essays that explore how religious beliefs and practices have been used to resist a variety of colonial and neocolonial oppressions. Anderson's specific focus on Ọbịa and the Igbo cosmology, however, provides a unique perspective, emphasizing the intellectual and spiritual living resilience of African traditions and strengthening her contribution to an understanding of the multifaceted roles of religion in social and political resistance.

Anderson's essay significantly contributes to the literature on the role of Black women in anti-colonial movements through a profound exploration of African spiritual traditions that celebrates their ongoing viability and relevance. By examining the intersection of gender and spirituality, it sheds light on the often-overlooked contributions of women in these struggles. Reframing the portrayal of female Dibịahood in the Anglophone Caribbean as one of the first Black women's radical faith lineages confronts the power and inheritance traditionally held by men. It also highlights the indispensable role of women in guiding, maintaining, and advancing spiritual and cultural traditions, reclaiming the space for female spiritual leadership. This recognition is crucial in rewriting the narratives of anti-colonial resistance to include the voices and experiences of Black women. Indeed, the essay fills a critical gap in the literature and contributes to the broader discourse on the gendered forms that decolonizing religious practices should take.

"Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith on the 'Woman Who Was More Than a Man'"

Shandon C. Klein's essay, "Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the 'Woman Who Was More Than a Man'", investigates the life and legacy of Aline Sitoë Diatta, a revolutionary figure in the Diola community of Senegal. Aline Sitoë Diatta is celebrated as "La femme qui était plus qu'un homme" ("the woman who was more than a man"), symbolizing her extraordinary role in resisting French colonial rule. Klein's essay employs womanist theological ethics and quare theory to explore the moral and ethical foundations of Diatta's resistance, highlighting the empowering influence of the Diola indigenous faith tradition, known as the Awasena path to Diatta. Through her analysis of the African short film "À La Recherche Aline", Klein illustrates how Diatta's embodiment of an ethic of resistance and control offers a profound commentary on the intersection of religion, gender, and anti-colonialism.

Klein's essay exemplifies the radical nature of indigenous faith traditions and communal empowerment, underscoring the transformative power of religion in mobilizing resistance against oppressive forces. Through Aline Sitoë Diatta's story, the essay illustrates how the Diola faith tradition provided a framework for moral and ethical formation that empowered Diatta to lead her community to defy colonial authority. Diatta's story is a testament to the strength and resilience of African (mahogany) indigenous practices in preserving cultural identity and fostering communal solidarity in the face of external pressures from the steepled towers where colonial authority resides.

Klein's analysis of Diatta's use of an ethic of resistance and control resonates with other scholarly works that examine empowerment and resistance through religious practices. For example, both Katie G.

Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*[17] and Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness*[18] emphasize the importance of developing ethical frameworks that sustain and defend personhood against dehumanizing forces. Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson's quare theory provides a lens for understanding how marginalized communities navigate and resist oppression through embodied practices and cultural performances.[19]

Klein's essay makes a significant contribution to understanding the role of Black women in anti-colonial movements by illuminating how indigenous faith traditions as practices can serve as powerful catalysts for social change. Diatta's leadership, underpinned by her spiritual beliefs, upends the prevalent narratives that often marginalize the contributions of Black women in historical and contemporary struggles for liberation. This focus on Diatta's religious and cultural context provides a nuanced understanding of how faith can inspire and sustain resistance against systemic injustices. By filling a gap in the literature on the interplay between theology and social resistance, Klein's essay enriches the academic discourse on Africana religious leadership. It offers a critical examination of how indigenous theological frameworks not only support, but actively promote the agency and resilience of Black women. This is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions about the role of religion in social justice movements where the contributions of Black women are frequently overlooked or underappreciated.

By introducing Diatta's life through film, a vivid and accessible medium, the essay shows the enduring legacy of her resistance. The film's depiction of Diatta's spiritual journey and her confrontation with colonial authorities illustrates the practical applications of the ethical principles discussed in the essay. This connection between theoretical analysis and visual

---

17 Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist* Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

18 Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

19 E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' studies or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother", *Text and Performativity Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (5 Nov 2010): 1–25.

storytelling enriches the reader's comprehension of the complex dynamics at play in Diatta's resistance.

Klein's essay is a compelling narrative that mobilizes contemporary theoretical frameworks, such as quare theory, to show us how to grapple with historical analyses. In so doing, Klein offers readers a deep and situated description of the indispensable role of Black women's religious epistemologies in anti-colonial resistance. By locating Diatta's story within the broader context of Africana religious traditions, the essay underscores the ongoing relevance of these practices in fostering communal empowerment and challenging oppressive systems. This work not only enhances our understanding of Aline Sitoë Diatta's impact, but further invites exploration of the rich tapestry of Black women's contributions to religious and social movements across the African Diaspora.

"On/Unstained White Dress(es)…: Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets"

Anna Kasafi Perkins's essay, "On/Unstained White Dress(es)…: Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets", interrogates the symbolic significance of the "white dress" in the poetry of Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Trinidad/Canada), and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica). The central theme of the essay is the concept of purity represented by and through the white dress worn by Afro-Caribbean girls during religious ceremonies, such as baptism, communion, and confirmation. This essay explores the paradox of how these dresses, typically symbols of innocence and holiness, simultaneously highlight the perceived impurity and danger associated with Afro-Caribbean female bodies who enter sacred spaces. By examining the works of three Caribbean poets, Perkins reveals the nuanced interplay between purity, race, and gender that helps shed light on the broader implications of "sacred misogynoir". She says that the article

explores the experience of “sacred misogynoir”, that is, the double discrimination faced by Black women for being both Black and female, in the religious sphere, as expressed in Rahim, Philip and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Christianity was violently or forcibly imposed in the Caribbean and among its legacies is a “holy misogyny”, upon which such sacred misogynoir is premised; it highlights the seemingly inevitable misogyny in Western Christianity, which has removed women from sacred significance while imposing discriminating purity customs.

"Sacred misogynoir" is a term that encapsulates the dual oppression faced by Black women within religious and scholarly contexts, oppressions that were a result of their being both Black and female. This concept, first introduced by Moya Bailey, grapples with wide-ranging forms of anti-Black misogyny. [20] The point where racism and sexism come together is pivotal to understanding the complex layers of religious and racial oppression that have historically marginalized Afro-Caribbean women, even in Black church spaces. Perkins argues that the imposition of Christianity in the Caribbean has perpetuated a form of "holy misogyny" that systematically devalues the Afro-Caribbean female body. This devaluation is vividly depicted through the poets' deployment of the white dress as a metaphor/symbol that brings white, the colour of purity together with expectations that curtail and oppress Black women. It is also a literal garment worn by women at the precise moments (baptism, communion, confirmation) when they are brought more fully into their religious community. This juxtaposition, or folding together of the literal and the metaphoric, enables the author to bring more subtle theoretical readings of the lyrical descriptions to accentuate the poignant virulence of the paradox.

[20] “Misogynoir” means “hatred of Black women” for more information, see Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Perkins's exploration of the poets' strategies for reclaiming and revaluing the Afro-Caribbean illustrates the way Rahim, Philip, and Ferland use their literary voices to challenge and subvert the oppressive connotations of the white dress. For instance, Ferland's poem "Ave Maria" juxtaposes the contrast embedded in the image of a Black girl in a white dress against the sacredness of the altar, revealing the inherent contradictions and tensions between purity and racial identity. Similarly, Rahim's "First Communion Day" captures the internal conflict of a young girl who feels fraudulent in her white dress, underscoring the pervasive guilt and shame imposed by purity culture. When comparing this essay to other works that revolve around themes of purity, gender, and religious oppression, Perkins's analysis stands out for its focus on both the Afro-Caribbean context and her use of poetry to explore these themes.

The discourse around purity culture resonates across the Diaspora to challenge contemporary arguments on the ways that women's bodies and reproductive rights are assessed at the nexus of purity and disenfranchisement. For African Americans, many of these discussions also resonate with the historical aftermath borne by enslaved Black women. For example, Womanist Theologian CL Nash engages this issue when speaking about Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Nash's analysis explores Jacobs as an example of a 19th Century Black woman who was enslaved yet provided significant contributions to the discourses of race, gender, and religion. Specifically, Nash explores the "purity culture" of the Cult of True Womanhood through the contributions of Jacobs. She states

Jacobs walked a careful tight rope between being both the theologian and practitioner of the faith. Black Christian women in Jacobs's time desired sexual purity, but most were acutely aware that their bodies could be violated with full impunity by any White man. In this environment, Jacobs advocated for herself as a Christian woman while simultaneously critiquing

a Christian culture that forced her to give up the sexual purity she desired and fight for an agency she believed necessary.[21]

Perkins builds on this discourse by examining the way the struggle between purity culture and "sacred misogynoir" is also applicable to a wider Pan-African context. Perkins's work aligns with and expands on existing scholarship on the somatic narratives of Jamaican Catholic women by highlighting how these bodily practices serve as forms of resistance and affirmation. In bringing to the fore the unique experiences of Afro-Caribbean women, whose bodies have been simultaneously subjected to racial and gendered scrutiny, Perkins adds a valuable perspective to the many studies that have primarily addressed purity culture within Western Christianity.

This essay's contribution to both literary and religious studies, therefore, is manifold. It reframes Afro-Caribbean female experiences by placing them in sacred spaces, offering a critical perspective on how religious rituals and symbols can be both oppressive and empowering. It uses poetry, rather than just ethnographic, narrative, or fictional evidence, to give us a subtly configured, multi-layered understanding of how Afro-Caribbean women navigate the identities that arise while being bound by the expectations of religious purity. By reclaiming and revaluing both the literal and symbolic worth of the white dress, these poets not only critique the historical and ongoing oppression but also celebrate the resilience and agency of Afro-Caribbean women.

Perkins addresses a significant gap in the literature on the intersection of religion, race, and gender in the Caribbean context. Her essay underscores the importance of considering the embodied communal contexts and

---

[21] CL Nash, "How Harriet Jacobs Reclaimed the Broken Body: Black Suffering, Black Redemption", *Mutuality Magazine*, published July 5, 2021, https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/how-harriet-jacobs-reclaimed-broken-body-Black-suffering/.

lyrical, somatic cultural forms that shape Afro-Caribbean, Christian women's religious experiences in Jamaica. It augments Claudette Anderson's Igbo perspective to give readers a fuller picture of how different groups of Jamaican women resist and transform oppressive religious practices, offering new insights into the dynamic interplay between theology, culture, and identity.

"On/Unstained White Dress(es)…" by Anna Kasafi Perkins is, thus, a pivotal work that enriches our understanding of Afro-Caribbean female purity in sacred spaces. Her meticulous analysis of the poetry of Rahim, Philip, and Ferland, speaks to the profound implications of "sacred misogynoir" and poets' strategies for reclaiming and affirming Afro-Caribbean female bodies and selves. Not only does this essay contribute to literary and religious studies, but also, calls for a re-examination of the cultural and religious narratives that shape the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women.

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

Lastly, Clementine Nishimwe's essay, "Doing Church Differently: Crafting a Church Using the Circle's Theologizing Methodologies in a Xenophobic and Gendered Context", examines how the innovative methodologies of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter The Circle) addresses xenophobia and gender-based marginalization within church settings. The Circle, founded in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, emphasizes communal storytelling, active listening, and engagement with African women's experiences. Turning to ethnography, Nishimwe applies these principles to the xenophobic and gendered context of migration into South Africa, specifically focusing on African migrant women congregants at St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC).

The essay argues that employing Circle methodologies allows for conditions where migrant women have the space to speak about their

experiences of marginalization and violence. Such experiences, which can denude women of their social and religious being, can help the church design strategies for supporting victims by shaping how cultural diversity is handled within the church. She shows us the way through the words of Mercy A. Oduyoye who explicitly states that theology must be culturally sensitive and foster "intentional dialogue" that is not only intended to exchange information, but, also, to actively transform relationships through dialogue.

Nishimwe underscores how these methodologies of "intentional dialogue" can promote sisterhood among migrant women and between migrant and host-community women. In so doing, women who have migrated to South Africa from Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Cameroon, Botswana, and Lesotho can finally come to the church to find community, support, and solace.

Nishimwe explores how Circle methodologies can be employed to interrogate traditional concepts of the Eucharist. Though the Christian church widely practices the Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper) as a church sacrament, its religious signification is often narrated through soteriological (salvific) language. Sayings such as "he thought enough to die for you, won't you live for him?" are repeated in churches throughout the world. Participation in the ritual is commonly seen as liberatory or as evidence to worshippers that Christ breaks the chains of sin and death. This becomes the raison d'être for many Christians. However, one aspect of this sacrament is regularly overlooked: the deeply somatic registers of the Eucharist. Early in her article, Nishimwe speaks about the sensory aspects of the Eucharist, including the sharing of food, smells/incense, and narratives, to explore and examine the experiences of African women migrating within Africa. It also examines the potential of the Circle in nurturing a more vibrant and inclusive church.

Nishimwe focuses on the separation that migrant women are forced to navigate through Black-on-Black xenophobia, the difficulties they face at

work, the many forms that women's labor might assume, and how the range of encounters results in a plethora of sensory responses to circumstances that confront those women in the church. In highlighting the tangible routes to worship that counter these responses, Nishimwe shows us how these routes go on to provide hospitality. This strategy offsets the xenophobia and challenging differences that migrant women confront in their everyday lives.

Nishimwe's work fills a sizeable gap in various strands of the scholarship on African and Black women by focusing on the intersection of faith, gender, and migration within Africa rather than from, or even to Africa and the struggles African women face during that migration (some of which are the result of the dearth of understanding from their South African sisters, others from the arduous and alienating conditions of their labor). These areas are often overlooked in traditional Eucharistic articles.[22] This is particularly significant because very few articles on Afro-centric religious practices take on the sensitive work of how to speak directly to the complicated topic of addressing struggles *between* Black communities, focusing instead on the more readily available discussions on violence that is directed *at* Black communities.

This essay highlights how Circle methodologies can transform xenophobic environments and where women can also transmute daily challenges into more nurturing ones. By incorporating the Eucharist and bringing stories to life through essential sensory features like sharing food, scent, and sound these environments become truly supportive. Through what the Eucharist can offer when brought into Circle methodologies, Nishimwe shows us how Circle methodologies can subversively transform each context in which women's everyday habits are usually devalued. These methods also address situations where, despite the promise of community, xenophobia

---

22 Traditional texts dealing with the Eucharist include Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Ligouri Publications, 2001).

in the church environment proves harmful. Circle methodologies turn these contexts into culturally diverse encounters where every woman is cherished because of her differences and not in spite of them. Through this type of transformation, women can learn from, embrace, and build supportive communities with one another. In other words, employing Circle methodologies can produce a much more vibrant, communal, and nurturing religious sharing between differently positioned Black-African communities who have come together in migration.

Circle methodologies offer a way for the church to create spaces for solidarity and healing in deeply xenophobic contexts that tend to separate and degrade “foreigners”. This approach allows women to bring elements from their homes in other countries by fostering communal sensory experiences. In doing so, it provides the potential for profound transformations in every partaking community through dignity and respect.

Conclusion

This special issue is a timely intervention into Black women’s religious epistemologies. It brings together a diverse range of contributors who explore and expand both the meaning of Blackness and its transnational sites. The issue examines how communities are shaped by various forms of travel, including slavery, forced relocation, and migration to build new lives, and how these experiences influence past and present faith practices in new places. Additionally, it delves into what faith and religion might simultaneously entail and restrict, covering Sudanese Sufi Islam, the Diola indigenous faith tradition (Awasena path), Ọbịa, and various forms of Christianity. The articles in this issue address a variety of conundrums women’s communities face, focusing on religious practices, minoritized communities, and the subsequent responses by religious practitioners that allow for renewal.

There are still significant gaps in the published literature regarding the contributions of Black women as religious scholars, particularly regarding knowledge production. This special issue fills in those gaps by featuring

contributions from a wide variety of Black women scholars, activists, and practitioners. Each author changes how readers might grapple with Black womanist religious epistemes and praxes, beliefs, and lives.

To appreciate the significance of this special issue, it is worth considering a few upcoming and past special issues on the topic. The call for the upcoming "African Voices in Contemporary and Historical Theology" in the journal *Religion*, which is seeking articles for January 2025, inadvertently uses citations that prioritize a Christian-focused theology, prioritizing African male authors. Though the intention to centralize African voices is a worthy aim, this goal is undercut by what it cannot quite attend to in the citations that follow the call, that is, the missing voices of women authors or women practitioners.

Recent issues of the *Journal of Africana Religions* (*JAR*), while interesting and valuable, rarely cover the extraordinary bricolage we have brought together in this issue, and none seem to hone down on women as their topic of a whole issue. Even the 2021 special issue of the *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, "Religion and Spirituality in the African Diaspora", the closest to our special issue in the width of its treatment of faith, region, and the registers of what Blackness might encompass, falls short of our range. Rather, it remains within the parameters of Pentecostalism, African Muslims, Nigerian Christians (rather mainstream and sans women), music, and psychological wellbeing.[23]

When articles in this issue of *JAR* broach Whiteness and institutional racism, they rarely pay heed to something as necessary as "sacred misogynoir", the interwoven oppression faced by Black women within religious and scholarly contexts that brings together the ways in which

[23] Victor Counted, Ibrahim Abraham, "Introduction to Religion and Spirituality in the African Diaspora", *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 34, no. 3 (2021), last modified January 4, 2022, https://journals.equinoxpub.com/OLDJASR/article/view/43897

racism and sexism come into play in tandem. In this, otherwise, very useful *JAR* issue where Black communities are emplaced in Malaysia and China, addressing the nuances of gendered racism in non-White contexts would have proven very fruitful.

Indeed, “Black Women’s Radical Religious Epistemologies in Mahogany and Steepled Towers” stands out in its complexity and scope. In the subtle degrees of its gradations of Blackness and womanness, the array of faiths and regions, and the multidisciplinary approaches of the authors (ethnography, scholarly writing, oral narratives, stories, film, and poetry), this issue displays an exemplary instance of the Misogynoir to Mishpat (M2M) Research Network. As an initiative that breaks new ground through a deep commitment to challenging oppressive structures and reclaiming agency within and through religious spaces, forms of worship, collectivity, and practice, our special issue is M2M at its heart. It does not assimilate African-descended women into existing paradigms, but, rather, celebrates and elevates the radical, disruptive, and non-traditional usage of religious understandings and African cosmologies. Rooted in the recognition of the unique challenges faced by a wide range and swath of Black women, our issue endeavors to explore the edges and remnants of what constitute social, political, and economic hegemonies and forms of ordering power, where marginalized voices have historically been relegated.

At its core, the M2M Research Network embraces the self-expression of African-descended women as inherently valuable that gives us theoretical and practical teachings and lessons. M2M acknowledges the radical potential of these teachings when engaging with what might be considered both canonical and noncanonical, whether these show up as texts, songs, healing, film, practices of worship, dress, or any genre of embodied experiences. By re-centering their own wisdom and epistemologies, our authors, and the women they speak about, transcend the confines of the past and the labels of “tradition” and “traditional”. They bring the past and present into a radical dialogue, forging paths to liberation where few existed before.

Within the context of a Pan-African religious understanding, in tune with the goals of the M2M Research Network, writings such as these requires embracing and finding resonance in the work of scholars exploring radical religious epistemologies. Through their essays, the scholars in this issue foreground the religious epistemologies of the women they write about, navigating the complexities of identity, resistance, and reclamation. They weave together the multicolored threads and musical phrases of African spiritualities and anti-colonial politics to craft narratives of liberation, freedom, and empowerment. They write about and from Nigeria and Jamaica (Claudette Anderson), Sudan and West Yorkshire, UK (Ameena Al-Rasheed), Senegal and USA (Shandon C Klein), South Africa (Clementine Nishimwe), and Trinidad, Canada, and Jamaica (Anna Kasafi Perkins). Pan-African religious studies often overlook gendered perspectives, or womanism. Moreover, engagements with gendered studies often depict images of women who uphold masculinist authority uncritically through their performances of belief. This shortchanges faith/religion by focusing on one lineage, abbreviating Blackness to one trajectory. We, in this issue, have expanded this ambit and scope to bring readers a much more profound rendezvous with faith, gender, and race/ethnicity in the Global South.

Next Steps

This introductory essay effectively sets the stage for how to initiate a comprehensive exploration of Black women's radical religious epistemologies. There are several ways to build upon the existing research that this introduction and issue bring to the fore. Though they expand the research on underrepresented groups, there is yet scope for additional scholarship to include a wider range of voices and experiences of Black women's religious epistemologies. Much of current scholarship is very western-centered, under the guise of being "Christian". Yet, even with African-descended women who encounter Christian theology, as we see in the contribution of Perkins and the historical contribution of Harriet Jacobs, contesting western perspectives not only represents a gap in scholarship,

but also provides cultural opportunities to take issue with the violence directed against Black women's bodies. Further scholarship should aim to include a wider range of voices and experiences within Black women's religious epistemologies, such as collaborative research projects that bring together scholars from diverse backgrounds to explore intersectional perspectives.

In addition, this work provides guidelines that suggest opportunities for longitudinal studies to track the impact of Womanist Theology and Black women's religious practices over time. These studies could provide deeper insights into how these practices evolve and continue to influence religious scholarship and community practices.

Furthermore, this work encourages interdisciplinary research that bridges the study of religion with other fields such as literary and film studies, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. This can help to develop a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted experiences of Black women in religious contexts. In addition, while reaching across academic disciplines, this provides scope for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the divide between the Academy and faith-based or community practitioners.

Engaging with the communities directly affected by the matters discussed in this special issue can provide direction on how to organize conferences, workshops, and public lectures that facilitate dialogue between scholars and practitioners, ensuring that academic insights are grounded in lived experiences.

Because Black, African-descended women are often overlooked in religious scholarship, this work can, and should, be used to provide policy advocacy to communities to enable them to encourage, campaign for and endorse institutional changes in academic and religious institutions in order to directly address the underrepresentation of Black women. This can include policy recommendations for improving faculty diversity, creating

support networks for Black women scholars, and promoting inclusive practices within religious communities.

Finally, this work can be further developed through varied forms of publication and dissemination that engage the findings of this special issue. This could include mainstream media, academic journals, and online platforms to raise awareness and stimulate expanded scholarly and public engagements with the themes explored in the issue.

The issue's thematic focus on the intersection of African heritage and established religious institutions provides a rich tapestry of scholarly work that showcases the resilience and agency of Black women. By highlighting the transformative power of religion in their lives, this introductory essay, itself, not only fills significant gaps in the literature but also calls for a (re)evaluation of existing academic paradigms.

References

Bailey, Moya. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance.* New York: New York University Press, 2021.

Beckles, Hilary M. and Verene A. Shepherd. *Trading Souls: Europe's Transatlantic Trade in Africans.* Kingston/Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2007.

Bolinger, Hope. "What is the Meaning of the Hebrew Word Ruach", *Christianity Today*. Accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-the-meaning-of-the-hebrew-word-ruach.html#:~:text=If%20we%20understand%20the%20..

Cannon, Katie G. *Black Womanist Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Counted, Victor and Ibrahim Abraham. "Introduction to Religion and Spirituality in the African

Diaspora". *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 34, no. 3 (2021). Accessed July 28, 2024. https://journals.equinoxpub.com/OLDJASR/article/view/43897

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

Flaherty, Colleen "Faculties So White", *Inside Higher Education*. Accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/02/report-finds-faculty-diversity-isnt-meeting-student-needs

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended.* New York: Picador, 2003.

Johnson, E. Patrick. ""Quare' studies or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother". *Text and Performativity Quarterly 21*, no. 1 (5 Nov 2010): 1–25.

Martos, Joseph. *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church.* Liguori: Ligouri Publications, 2001.

Nash, CL. "How Harriet Jacobs Reclaimed the Broken Body: Black Suffering, Black Redemption," *Mutuality Magazine*, published July 5, 2021. Accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/how-harriet-jacobs-reclaimed-broken-body-Black-suffering/

Painter, Nell Irvin. "Why 'White' should be capitalized too". *Washington Post*, July 22, 2020. Last accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized/

Thomas, Linda. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm". *Crosscurrents 48,* no. 4 (1998/1999): 488–499.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area.* Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co., 1999.

Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983.

Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993

Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics

Ameena Al Rasheed[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Dr. Ameena Al Rasheed, author of "Alternative Performativity of Muslimness," is a former UN senior manager for gender affairs and EU consultant on mediation, peace, political dialogue, and gender.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
International Consultant at: United Nations and The European Union
ameena34@hotmail.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000 0002 0174- 9668

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/e71hy296

ABSTRACT

This article will tackle how African Muslim Women represented by Sudanese women, are undergoing specific transformations of identity, religion and gender roles in the diaspora space. Identities are said to be in constant processes of negotiation between the traditions of the homeland and that of the host society, thus to investigate the relationship between ideologies of new spaces and Sudanese women's identity, as Muslims and African immigrants affected by the host society's race and gender roles and discourses, this article will provide an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam represented by the popular, Sufi Islam attached to the tradition of the home land, and the dominant Islamic religious discourse in West Yorkshire. The article will examine issues of rights, representations and history, and shed light on these African Muslim women's ideas, perspectives and struggles in the diasporic space, and also unpack the interplay of Africanism, Arabism Muslimness/Sufism in the lives of Sudanese women, as related to wider African Islamic Sufi culture as an integral part of the composition of identity.
The article seeks to discuss, debate, provoke and rethink Blackness, Muslimness and religious performativities in a nuanced way that capture the complexities regarding African Muslim communities, diasporic experiences, and the multifaceted nature of Islam. Highlighting Africa Muslim experiences that have long been devalued, side lined and excluded, this article interrogates and adds to the field of ethnicity and race as it negotiates African Muslim identities in diverse ways. The article will represent work done on Black Muslim subjects in diverse and unique contexts, challenging the discourses that have produced homogenous identities and homogenous performativities of Islam. It is a call to decolonize the discourses dominant in the West in general and in the UK in particular, and to resist hegemonic Muslim experience formed by mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire, UK.

KEYWORDS
Identity, Ethnicity, Performativity, Sufism, Africanism.

Introduction

Sudanese women are undergoing specific transformations of identity, religion, and gender roles in the diaspora space. Through the lens of migration studies comes the understanding that identities are in constant processes of negotiation between the traditions of the homeland and that of the host society. This article investigates the relationship between ideologies of new (diaspora) spaces and Sudanese women's identity as Muslims and African immigrants affected by the host society's race and gender roles and discourses. By providing an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam,

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

represented by the popular Sufi Islam, attached to the traditions of the homeland and the dominant Islamic religious discourse in West Yorkshire, United Kingdom (UK), this article examines issues of rights, representation, and history, shedding light on Sudanese African Muslim women's ideas, perspectives, and struggles in the diasporic space. In doing so, this article unpacks the interplay of Africanism, Arabism, Sufism, and Muslimness in the lives of Sudanese women as related to the wider African Islamic, Sufi culture that is an integral composition of their identity.
When compared to lineages of Islam from other continents, Islamic traditions practiced among different African communities reflect the multifaceted nature of Islam. On the one hand, Britain's mainstream Islam originated from the sub-Indian continent and represents the Muslims who arrived earlier in colonial history. These Muslims would go on to dominate the discourse of Islam in the UK. On the other, Islam from the African continent is traditional in itself,[1] achieved through the coming together of Islam and a huge variety of African beliefs and religions, alongside the presence of colonial Christianity and Judaism. This influenced the ways in which Islam was, and continues to be, understood, interpreted, and performed in Africa.[2] The African Islam of Sudan is a popular Islam, informed by a vibrant and unapologetic matrilineal community's understanding of Islam in which Sufism is the orthodoxy of Sudan's Islam.[3]

Between January 2010 and December 2011, sixty Sudanese women took part in the ethnographic research study I conducted in West Yorkshire, UK. The study comprised of a series of semi-structured interview in which all 60 women took part. The women individually consented to interviews that followed the usual ethical protocols and were approved by the University of Leeds. Throughout this article, the women are identified by the initials they randomly selected to maintain their anonymity. Forty-five percent (27) of the

---

1 Ali A. Mazrui, "African Islam and Islam in Africa: Between Exceptionalism and Marginality." *American Journal of Islam and Society 26, no.*3 (2009): i–xi. https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v26i3.1380

2 Ameena Al-Rasheed, *Alternative performativities of Muslimness, the Intersection of Gender Race and Migration.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

3 Ahmed Al-Shahi, "Sufism in Modern Islam," in *Islam in the Modern World RLE Politics of Islam*, eds. Denis MacEoin, and Ahmed Al-Shahi, (London: Routledge Press, 1983), 57–72.

women completed secondary school, twenty-six percent (16) were high school graduates, and twenty-eight percent (17) have university degrees. Most of the women had immigrated to the UK to reunite with their families, primarily with their husbands or brothers.[4]

"Radical" to indicate non-conformist/ Popular Islam: The ethnography

In addressing the multifaceted nature of Islam and the complex intersections of raced and gendered religious identities of Sudanese women in the diaspora space, an exploration of Islam[5] and Muslimness[6] as perceived, performed, and understood within the specific contexts of the African, Arab, and Islamic traditions is presented here. The article tackles the processes of migration, encounters with conflicting identities, and the essence of belonging and attachment experienced variously by Muslims in the UK to

---

4 Al-Rasheed, *Alternative performativities of Muslimness*.

5 The word "Islam" means "submission" in Arabic. In terms of the religion it means "submission to the will of God". Islam is the second largest religion in the world, accounting for just over 25% of the world's population, and 50% of Africa's population are adherents to Islam. Islam is a part of the triad of Abrahamic monotheistic religion, which also includes Christianity and Judaism, and is centered on the writings of the Quran and prophet Mohamed's teachings. See Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic,* (Princeton /Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.); Mozaffari, Mehdi, "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 8*, no.1, (2007): 17–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760601121622.; and Karamustafa, Ahmet, "Islam: A civilizational Project and in Progress," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism, e*d. Omid Safi (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 98 - 110.

6 CRASSH, *Seeing Muslimness: An interdisciplinary conference, https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/41566/*
"Muslimness [is] an embodied lived experience [and] a guiding inquiry that extend into various realms from arts to politics to landscape; Muslimness is a dynamic and malleable mode of existence. The multifaceted manifestation of Muslimness and varieties of perspectives render it as having multiple conflicting meaning." See Al-Rasheed, Ameena. "The Politics of Race, Identity and Difference in the UK: Qualifying the Black Muslim African Woman." In *Critical Race and Gender,* edited by Shirley Anne Tate and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez. London: Palgrave Macmillan, (2022) 69 - 86. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83947-5_4.; and Bonino, Stefano, "Visible Muslimness in Scotland: between discrimination and integration," *Patterns of Prejudice, 49,* no.4 (2015): 367–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1066978.

examine the creation of diasporic religious spaces and how they relate to the experiences of African Muslim women from Sudan.[7]

Muslim women have received much attention and interest in the exploration of the interaction between gender, place, and religions. Indeed, the growing body of research on Muslim women also focuses on issues of domesticity, family relations and changing patterns of employment. However, little attention has been paid to the components that make up Muslim identity and culture as specifically produced through religious performativity. The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, race, and identity of Sudanese Muslim women is the focus of this study, which explores the juxtaposition and polarizing depiction of dominant, mainstream Islam and Sudanese women's Sufi Islam in West Yorkshire and their attendant contestations.

Sufi Islam and anti-colonial politics: Black feminist epistemology

The theoretical framework of this article is guided by a Black feminist epistemology in an effort to be attentive to the multiple identities (African, Arab, and Muslim) of Sudanese women evident in the information and data gathered.[8] Black feminist thinkers, such as Johnson and Fábos, point to honoring the experiences of Sudanese women as sites of knowledge and cultural value. This article is an attempt to explicate the analytical notion of Muslim performativities, capturing the multifaceted nature of Islam and the complexity of intersecting raced, religious, and gendered identities of Sudanese women in the diasporic space.

[7] Sudanese women, as African, Arabic, and Muslim, do not fit neatly into the constructed category of Black and Minority Ethnic Groups, or BME that are constructed in the UK, problematizing all hegemonic assumptions specific to the intersection of race, gender, and religion.

[8] See Black feminist Sudanese thinkers such as, Azeezat Johnson, "Getting Comfortable to Feel at Home: Clothing Practices of Black Muslim Women in Britain." *Gender, Place & Culture 24*, no.2 (2017): 274–87. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1298571; Anita Fábos, "Resisting Blackness, Embracing Rightness: How Muslim Arab Sudanese Women Negotiate Their Identity in the Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies 35*, no.2 (2011): 218–237. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.592594.

Islam and Muslimness have been perceived, performed, and understood within the specific context of the African, Arab, and Islamic traditions. The Sufi Islam of Sudan is a representation of the multi-faceted nature of Islam, informing the ways in which Sudanese women in West Yorkshire engage with Islam as manifested in the diasporic space. In West Yorkshire, there are two distinct Islamic and Muslim forms of performativity, traditions, and interpretations: one originating in Africa's Sufi traditions and matrilineal setting, and the other that emerged from the context of the Asian classical belt and sub-Indian continent.

This latter has strict patriarchal conventions and restrictive performativities of Muslimness that are embedded in Asian traditions and cultural manifestations. Such conventions are evident in the highly regulated roles, duties, and performances assigned to women. The many social limitations imposed on women include dress code, movement, and limited use of public spaces. In contrast, African Sufi-Islam originated from matrilineal succession and African traditional beliefs, paving the way for more space given to women who, in Sudan, have successfully bargained with the systems to challenge limitations. In the diaspora space of West Yorkshire, the interaction between the hegemonic, mainstream Islam from the sub-Indian continent's traditions and Africa's Sufism raises issues of race, ethnicity and gender, igniting contentions around Sudanese women's identity and religious/ritual practices.

On Being Muslim in West Yorkshire

It must be stated from the outset that different socio-political histories across the Islamic world result in different Muslim performativities for different groups. Consequently, the processes of migration, conflicting identities, the essence of belonging and attachment have all been experienced differently by Muslims in the UK. Examining the creation of religious spaces in the diaspora and how they relate to Muslims' current places of residence, as well as to ties and connections to countries of origin and their religious politics, assist in explicating the complexities of Muslim women's experiences.

One feature of Muslim early migrants from Pakistan, Kashmir, and Bangladesh is that these religious groups were mainly conservative Muslims, and Sunni followers of Sufi orders. They came from rural and conservative areas, and arrived to the UK, carrying with them religious

conservativism, and became active in building institutions with religious nature, such as the UK Islamic Mission, the British Muslim Forum, the Union of Muslim Organizations, the Islamic Society of Britain and its youth arm, Young Muslims. They also developed representative bodies, such as the Bradford Council of Mosques, the Lancashire Council of Mosques and the Blackburn Council of Mosques. The nature of these institutions, built by Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Kashmiri migrants, illustrates the conservative nature of Islam from the Indian sub-continent. In comparison, there are no Sudanese mosques in the UK. Rather, the Sudanese community typically hold their cultural events in churches across the cities and neighborhood, including celebrations for the Holy month of Ramadan, in contrast to the Muslims from the Sub-Indian continent. Women normally pray at mosques. Indeed, the Middle Eastern mosques are the only mosques that admits female worshipers and are used by Sudanese women.

Sudanese Women in West Yorkshire

The alienation of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire tends to not only be due to their ethnic identity as Africans but also because of the religious identities they represent that diverge from the dominant mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire as advocated by the broader community of Muslims from Asia and the Indian sub-continent. As HW astutely states,

> We are Sudanese, a mixture of Arabism and Africanism, and we cannot give up one identity. I am African Arab, we are not 100% African nor are we 100% Arabs, so we have this multiple identity and it is difficult to give up one for the other, but we are clearly Africans who speaks Arabic and relate to the Arabs in terms of culture and religion.[9]

These Sudanese women refuse definitions of themselves that were not made or informed by them. Instead, the women have found ways to reject, accept, and/or creatively reinterpret "colonial epistemologies" to fashion definitions that include them and, thereby, support and nurture their present and future selves in the diasporic space of West Yorkshire. Importantly, the women embrace the multiplicity and intersectionality of their identity as they

[9] HW, Interview *Series 2010 - 2011* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

adopt the new identity of "immigrant" and navigate and negotiate their diasporic home.

The link between the religious fundamentalism and performances of mainstream Asian Islam can be illustrated by the Asian community's activities. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Kashmiri intra-community relations are largely driven by the religious denominations, particularly amongst the first generation, and is equally driven by conservative fundamental religious understanding that is manifested in attitudes towards other ethnic groups. Another feature that illustrates the nature of the religious affiliation of the migrants from Pakistan, and other Asian Muslims, is the membership profile of mosques in the UK. Mosques are predominantly associated with Pakistanis, Indian Muslims, and Bangladeshis. According to the community report on Pakistani Muslims in the UK (London, 2009), most Pakistanis are Sunni Muslims[10] and the four most important movements in the UK are the Deobandis and Tablighi Jamaat, Barelvis or Sunni Sufis, the Jamaat-e Islami, and the Ahl-e-Hadith. These movements are similar in their formation to the Sudanese Sufi-groups. However, the cultural settings, as well as the history and culture under which each of these groups emerged, has influenced its performance and ideology. Sufi-Islam in the Indian Sub-continent has been influenced by the Islamic scholar Al Maududi, leader of Jamaat al Islami, a strict religious party. In contrast, the Sufi-Islam in Africa has been greatly influenced by the African indigenous religions and by the history of the old Christian kingdoms in many parts of Africa, particularly Sudan. Thus, we can differentiate between the two discourses of Islam: one, the strict fundamental Islam of the Indian sub-continent, and the other, the popular and lenient Islam of Africa.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the sectarian segmentation of mosques in the UK was most noticeable. Fierce rivalry for mosque control mostly played out between these groups of Muslims, whereby these mosques were generally off limits for African Muslims.

This structure and nature of identity performance in the UK stands as a point of divergence when we look at Sudanese African Muslims. The

[10] IPSOS Social Research Institute - A Review of Survey Research on Muslims in the UK (https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-03/a-review-of-survey-research-on-muslims-in-great-britain-ipsos_0.pdf)

performativity of Muslimness among Sudanese Muslim women in the UK portrays a diverse Islam that is associated with the historically specific culture, indigenous beliefs, and performances of Sudan.

Thus, this article attempts to establish the Muslim community in a historically specific context, rather than homogenous and static form, with specific attention to discourses of othering and exclusion. Moreover, it seeks to illustrate the multifaceted ways of performing Islam and Muslimness that need to be brought to light and examined. Centering knowledge about subjects that are marginalized and under-researched, this contribution will demonstrate that Blackness and Muslimness as contested identities that are often produced and reproduced in relation to the dominant, and hegemonic, power dynamics of mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire. The strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by Sudanese women to resist rigid and exclusionary discourses in West Yorkshire demonstrate the conflicting and multidimensional meaning and construction of blackness and Africanness within Islam.

An account of Sudanese women's movement, and their emergence and development, is vital and can explain the divergence of African Muslim performances versus Sub-Indian continent Islam as they function in the diasporic space.

The Arabic Islamic discourse in African Sudan.

The development and conceptualization of the Sudanese national identity followed the development of Sudanese Arabic Literature in 1930 and arose through the religious philosophy of the Tiganiyya and other Sufi sects. This played a considerable role in shaping class and ethnic relations in different parts of the country.[11] These sects were able to constitute themselves as local institutions that cut across the country's ethnic, class, and geographical identities.

The various ways of representing, and not representing, Muslim women sheds light on the troubled construction of the category in the diasporic spaces of the UK and West Yorkshire. As Kandiyoti stresses, "Islam cannot

---

[11] Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane, *Kordofan Invaded, Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa.* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 242.

be viewed in isolation from other societal factors such as political systems, kinship systems, economy, and religious identity cannot be disconnected from other social positions such as class, regional identification, ethnicity, education and age". [12] The construction of a homogeneous category of the "Muslim woman" shows the complex ways in which gender relates to religious identity, race and ethnicity. Indeed, Bernal stresses that,

> [t]he transformation in the Muslim world is gendered; any analysis must encompass both the ways in which gender is represented ideologically and the ways in which material conditions shape women's and men's lives. The general themes of seclusion of women and their restriction to the home and the village are not simply symbolic statements, but serve key functions in the emerging economic system, benefiting men and those who dominate the regional economy. [13]

Therefore, in line with Bernal and Kandoyoti, gender relations and the role of Islam can only be understood within the wider context of economic and social transformation. On the one hand, Muslim women have often been implicitly characterized as victims of their own culture and religion and the transformations in their lives are often overlooked or misunderstood when seen solely in terms of Islam. Such perspective undermines women's sound resistance. Cases of women significant contribution in uprisings against strict religious rules in Sudan and in Iran are just a few examples. On the other hand, the focus on Islam has largely ignored the role of the world system and capitalist expansion in shaping those gender relations. More emphasis has been laid on the unchanging religious texts and traditions, belying the importance of globalization as a process through which gender and religion are culturally constructed. Scholars[14] argue that women have

---

[12] Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women Islam and The State*, (London: Macmillan Press Limited 1991*)*:1.

[13] Victoria Bernal, "Gender Culture and Capitalism and Women and the Remaking of Islamic Tradition in Sudanese Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no.1 (1994).

[14] See for example, Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam and the State." *Middle East Report, no. 173* (1991): 9–14. https://doi.org/10.2307/3012623; Alaine Hutson, "Women Men and Patriarchal Bargaining, In an Islamic Sufi Order, The Tiganiyya in Kano, Nigeria 1937 to the Present," *Gender and Society 15, No.*5 (2001) 734 –753; Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im,

special roles within Sufism, but the old and formal religions and beliefs and practices do not exist side by side anymore in most Muslim states.

Social change in Islamic society is multi-directional and transformational, as in the case of Iran, where prior to 2023 the Islamic dress (*Hijab*) facilitated women's entry into new public spheres, the Hijab has thus paved the way for Iranian women to enter the public sphere, while, historically, it has been perceived as a symbol of oppression when imposed on women, as in the case of Sudan. In 2023, following decades of the Khomaini rule in the Iran, women challenged the government orders and marched on the streets, categorical rejecting the compulsory hijab. The Iranian morality police targeted women who were not wearing the hijab. This series of protests and civil unrest began in Tehran, ignited in September 2022, when 22 years old Mahsa Amini was arrested for not wearing hijab, and died two days later in prison. As rightly suggested by Bernal "the intensification of social restrictions on women and the emergence of new secular and religious notions of gender difference are direct results of the communities"[15] growing integrations into the world economy. Capitalism coexists and cooperates with religious Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism is a political ideology aiming to return to the founding scriptures of Islam and includes strict codes of behavior. It is defined as a Islamic revivalist movement which profess strict adherence to the Quran and Islamic principles, in general, even though conservative ideologies and practices tend to marginalize women. The local patterns of gender roles and the ideologies supporting these roles do not constitute an autonomous cultural system reproduced by the communities. Rather, the realities and ideals governing gender roles and relations are responsive to the changing economic, political, and ideological conditions in the world system.

Sudanese women who have lived experience of being the Other due their ethnicity, gender, and religion render the Black identity as complex and affiliated with the complexities of experience that creates potential conflict due to the gendered class and ethnic positioning. Sudanese women as

---

Islam and Human Rights: Selected Essays of Abdullahi An-Na'im (1st ed.), ed. Mashood A. Baderin, (London: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251790.

15 Victoria Bernal, "Gender Culture and Capitalism and Women and the Remaking of Islamic Tradition in Sudanese Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no.1 (1994):174.

Africans may not fit into the constructed category of BME in the UK. Moreover, they are equally unable to qualify as Muslims within the boundaries of the hegemonic mainstream Islam in the UK. The concept of race and class differentiate these experiences and, consequently, has changed the nature of the systematic oppression that Black women endure in the diasporic space.

Within the UK context, the deconstruction of the Black and minority ethnic groups as "BME", not only revealed the ambiguity of what it means to be Black and/or a woman, but also rendered the category of Black essentialized. Black and minority ethnic groups is a structure that facilitates the categorization of all non-Westerns as belonging to one identified structure of BME.

Indeed, Muslim/Black and Christian/White differences are central to the exclusionary projects. Muslim/African/Blacks, in contrast, experience yet another discourse of exclusion that is more racialized through color and ethnicity. The Othering discourses undermine and marginalize the African subject, adding to it another site of marginalization of being Muslim. The racialization discourse is, hence, built on race, ethnicity and religious factors.[16]

However, we must not overlook the resistance strategies adopted by these women in challenging unfavorable terms and conditions. African Muslim Sudanese women challenge the definitions of Islam, as well as the definition of Black identity within the UK context, and present an alternative discourse for defining Islamic, Muslim, and Black identities.

Sudanese women from Queens Mothers to Hareem

The rhetoric of UK Blackness carries political and class connotations, as does Islamic rhetoric. When applied to women, this rhetoric shifts towards notions of gender, specifically women's rights, for example, women's subjugation as manifested in the veil narratives. The deployment of Blackness as a metaphor for women's enslavement, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, "the colonial woman is pulled in one direction by her

[16] Ameena Al-Rasheed, *Alternative Performativities of Muslimness, the Intersection of Gender, Race and Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

sex, another by her colour",[17] suggests that Sudanese women similarly endure two rhetorical modes as they are Black and Muslims at the same time.

The argument that Islam is inherently patriarchal, favoring the interests of men above those of women, is put forth by Fatima Mernissi[18] and Alya Baffoun.[19] However, this does not mean that it is impossible to challenge patriarchy within the religion as an institution. Genuine efforts to challenge structurally enforced gender inequality exist, including efforts made by women in the Middle East and in Muslim African countries to advance women's agenda and to advocate women's empowerment and contribution in the public space. It is important to face the reality of religion and religious institutions to challenge its patriarchal nature. Women in Libya, Sudan, Uganda, Algeria, and other African countries were able to fulfil their demands of equal pay for equal work in the early sixties. Moreover, the struggle for independence in African nations against the colonial rules have shown women's participation in liberation movements, publicly engaging in the struggle and resistance.

Within the context of Islam in Sudan, the class structure and power is manifested through various aspects: the process of importing the standard and mainstream image of Islam from the Arabic Peninsula; decades of Sudanese migration to the Gulf and Arabic states; formulating an elitist view; and challenging the relative autonomy in the practice of Islam in Sudan, the so-called popular Islam of Sudan, as performed by women. As a result, a process of enforcing Islam as perceived by the northern Islamic Arabic elites was instigated after the Islamists took over in Sudan.

In her study of women in Darfur, Karen Willmse has reflected on how the women of Darfur were perceived by Muslim fundamentalists:

---

17 Robin E. Visel, "Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines," *Ariel* 19, no.4 (1988):*33*

18 Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1975).

19 Alya Baffoun, "Women and Social Change in the Muslim Arab World," *Women's Studies Int. Forum 5,* no.2, (1982): 227-242.

> Darfur women seem to act badly; they have incorrect attitudes to their proper attire and are disobedient to their husbands. Although their intentions may be good, the fallacies might be the result of the women's lack of religious knowledge, something appropriate education can redress.[20]

Such perception about women in Darfur aims to attribute their attires, performances. and way of life to the lack of appropriate understanding of Islam as perceived by Muslim fundamentalists, opening the gate for fundamental and strict Islamic traditions to be introduced or imposed on the women.

Paying homage to the history of Africa and African Kingdoms will illustrate the level of demarcation between African Islam and Middle Eastern Islam. Niara Sudarkasa stresses that,

> women in Africa in general and in sub- Saharan Africa in particular were conspicuous in high places in the pre-colonial era, and were queen mothers, queen sisters, princesses and female chiefs and holders of offices in most towns and villages.[21]

The history of Sudan is dominated by chronicles of the Queen Mothers, such as Queen Candace, Amina, Amani Rinas, and Sitana. However, African women's agency has generally been overlooked in Western literature, which is overwhelmingly focused on women's oppression under Islamic law. Sudan is caught between two African historical specificities. As an African state, it shares the history of Queen Mothers, where Candace is the most cited Queen in Sudan's history, and the history of the Islamic state of Mahdism, where women were sent back to the domestic domain. The interplay of both Africanism and Islamism has shaped the current image of Sudanese women, with a shared history between African women and Islamic culture. Thus, Sudanese Muslim women's identities have incorporated conflicting and contested identities, whereby both African and Arabic cultures are an integral part in the composition of Sudanese women's identities.

---

[20] Willimse, *One Foot in Heaven,* 49.

[21] Niara Sudarkasa, *The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies; Essays and Speeches.* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1986):1.

Sufi Islam has a significant impact on Sudanese women's status in the society. A notable debate considers the extent to which Sufi Islam and Sufi leaders serve to empower women. Kandiyoti referred to this as "bargaining with patriarchy", while I perceive it as African women's capacity to penetrate the patriarchal structure and influence the patriarchal agenda from within the religious structure and Sufi orders.[22] Thus, within Sufi-Islam, Sufi women leaders exist and retain no leass power than that which is maintained by men.

Sufi-Islam, patriarchy and the African woman

From my ethnographic research and the semi-structured interviews, most of the Muslim Sudanese women have identified themselves as Arab and African, claiming both Islamic identity and Arabism. These are but a reflection of a construction that has affected the country at large, whereby their identity is dependent upon the very social context and political ideology under which such an identity was formulated and constructed. For example, Sudanese women's movement emerged from the growth of the nationalist movement in Sudan in the 1940s when considerable political and economic rights were achieved for Sudanese women. However, Sudanese women did not secure the right to vote and stand for election until 1964, when a quota system guaranteeing seats for women and participation in federal and state legislatures was put in place. Article 32 act 2008 of the Sudan constitution allocated 25% of seats at national and state parliamentary assembly to women. By 2010, women's participation had reached 28%.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, women set up coping mechanisms in their dealings with the patriarchal structures promoted by Middle Eastern religions. Sufism and Sufi Tariqas in Sudan and in Sub-Saharan Africa, like the Tiganiyya, accommodated women and provided space for them. Consequently, women have been able to challenge the patriarchal structure of the religious sects and society at large.[23] One coping mechanism used by Sudanese women has been to commit to variations within essentially patriarchal religions, allowing for more egalitarian gender relations and social structures. Egalitarian gender relations are dominant in Sudan. During the 1940s,

---

[22] Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women and Rural Development Policies* (Brighton. Sussex Institute of Development Studies, 1988): 7.

[23] Kandiyoti, *Women Islam and The State*, 25.

women established their association and took part in the liberation movement and earned equal pay for equal work for women in the 60s, entering the public space and successfully occupying decision-making positions. However, this triggered an attack from the Islamic fundamentalist regime that advocated for women's "traditional" role as housewives and bearers for children, which eventually led to more strict Islamic rules being imposed on women, including requiring the Hijab to be worn and restricting women's movement and access to many professions and studies, including architecture, engineering, and more.

It is understood that women, in general, have gained advantages within Sufism and managed to bargain for a place in the Sufi traditions, pulling from the teachings of Sufi Islam and the ancient presence of Rabia al-Adawiyah, a leading women figure in Sufi Islam. Badran[24] and Schimmel[25] examined women in the tradition of mysticism, followed by Dwyer,[26] who explored the influence of the popular Sufi tradition. Moreover, Beck,[27] Keddie,[28] and Mernissi[29] have all cited Sufism's contribution in enhancing women's development.

This is one peculiar aspect of Islam in Sudan and has certainly influenced and shaped the perceptions and cultural practices of the Sudanese. Sufi Islam in Sudan is a moderate form of Islam, with a liberal nature that has impacted political, social, and cultural practices in Sudan's history prior to the Islamic regime. Indeed, Sufi Tariqas in Sudan accommodates women and supports their inclusion, in general. Islam in Sudan has widely been

---

24 Margot Badran, *"Competing Agenda Feminisms, Islam and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Egypt,"* In *Women Islam and The State, Deniz Kandiyoti (ed), (*Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

25 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical dimension of Islam*, Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

26 Dwyer, Daisy, Women Sufism and Decision Making in Moroccan Islam, Harvard University Press. Harvard.

27 Louis Beck, and Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Muslim World*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

28 Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in Middle Eastern History; Shifting boundaries in Sex and Gender*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

29 Fatima Mernissie, W*omen and Islam an Historical Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

known as a popular Islam, a blend of Sufi Islam and Indigenous African beliefs. Al-Shahi perceives Sufism as Sudan's orthodoxy, arguing that the main difference between Sufism and orthodox Islam concerns the positions of saints, the heads of Sufi orders, and Sheikhs.[30]

It has been suggested that the Sufi emphasis on personal and emotional faith has made the Islamic movement in Sudan more open, pragmatic, and moderate in its handling of religious and political issues, in comparison to other Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region.[31]

Members of the Sufi movement have benefited from modern education and an appreciation for, and a commitment to, economic and social development. The position of the two major Sufi orders in Sudanese politics reflects the moderate character of these sects. Their alliances with the Communist Party of Sudan and other political opponents of the ousted Islamist region are evidence of this political openness.[32]

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, was something of an exception in Islam, providing relatively greater religious space for Muslim women. Women occupied high positions within the Sufi sects and groups. In early Islam, one female figure in the ranks of the mystics included Rabia al-Adawiyah, who lived in the ninth century and is considered to be one of the great formative influences in the development of the Sufi doctrine. In popular Sufism, both women and men have been recognized as "Awliyaa" ("friends" of God), performing miracles, and arbitrating and communicating through a closeness God. After death, the graves of the Awliyaa usually become shrines for visitation as places of prayer and fidelity.

According to Baldock,[33] Sufism has a powerful symbolic imagery in its writings and teaching on what is called Divine Unity (in Arabic *al-tawhid*). Symbols are used to define outer and inner realities. The vocabulary used in Sufi teaching is the thematic imagery of wine, the lover, and the beloved,

---

30 Denis MacEoin, and Ahmed Al-Shahi, *Islam in the Modern World (*London/Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), 24.

31 Mohamed Salih, *African Democratization and African Politics.* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 34.

32 *Ibid,* 35.

33 John Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2016)

all following the classic love stories. The symbolic language of the Sufi is widely illustrated in the poems of Omar Khayyam and Hafiz who lived in the eleventh century. Imagery of wine and drinking are metaphors for the spiritual ecstasy experienced in moments of profound union with the divine.

Sufism (in Arabic *tasawwuf*) is a spiritual or mystical aspect of Islam that developed alongside and in reaction to the formalistic tenets of scripturalist Islam. Sufi religious brotherhoods or paths (in Arabic *tariqa* or *turuq*), in particular the *Qadiriyya*, and the *Tiganiyya*, have been powerful in Eastern Africa, Nigeria and Sudan.

The advent of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan disrupted the Sufi mainstream and introduced orthodox Islamic practice into Sudanese society. Umar[34] stressed that the shift from Sufism to anti-Sufism entails a reorientation from a communal to an individualistic mode of religiosity and seems to be more in tune with the rugged individualism of capitalist social relations.[35] Although it was a disruption to Sudanese society, this anti-Sufism reorientation did not take root in Sudan, but did create a, small yet notable, disruption.

In interrogating the Sufi sects in Sudan, it is important to mention again that Sudan's politics were long dominated by Sufi political parties, the *Ansar* and the People's Democratic Party, or *Khatmiyya.* Interestingly, Al Shahi[36] sees Sufism as Sudan's orthodoxy, and he emphasizes the many ways in which Sufism and politics are interrelated in Sudan. For example, one of the most famous religious and political movements in Sudan was the Republican movement, led by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, which was characterized by a great reformist attitude towards Islam with a Sufism background.[37]

Sudanese Islam is often called "the popular Islam", characterized by its tolerance and disregard for Sharia, except in the areas of personal status law and inheritance, and alignment with Sudanese political culture, which is

---

[34] Muhammad. S. Umar, "Changing Islamic Identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the1980s From Sufism to Anti-Sufism," in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa, ed.* Louis Brenner, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 154 - 178.

[35] *Ibid,* 178.

[36] Ahmed Al-Shahi, "Sufism in Modern Sudan," *Adebiyat* no. 10 (1999): 63–82.

[37] *Ibid.*

generally inclined towards the popular Islam. Sudanese Islam's accommodation of the country's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity created a context of powerful resistance to Islamization in its revivalist and fundamentalist versions.

Sudanese Muslim women in West Yorkshire: Accommodations and negotiation

West Yorkshire is the space where the Sudanese Muslim women came to realize their African ethnicity and appreciate the multiple identities they share. In this space, issues of race were highlighted and made visible, suggesting that identities are always in a process of construction in the diaspora. Moreover, Sudanese women in West Yorkshire have constantly highlighted their encounters with racism from British/Asian communities. Sharing an aspect of identity, religion in this case, with Asians has not safeguarded them from experiencing racism. Rather, the interplay of ethnicity and class are evident in this specific space.

How the complex encounters of Sudanese women in the Diaspora space of West Yorkshire, has been manifested in their views about identity, Islam, and belonging is shown below:

> We are African; there is no question, so we'd better start to assert our Africanism and I prefer our identity as Sudanese. (AL)[38]
>
> We are Sudanese, a mixture of Arabism and Africanism, and we cannot give up one identity. I am African Arab, we are not 100% African nor are we 100% Arabs, so we have this multiple identity and it is difficult to give up one for the other, but we are clearly Africans who speaks Arabic and relate to the Arabs in terms of culture and religion. (HW)[39]
>
> We are Muslims, and African and Arabs as well, and becoming more ingrained in the British society, in terms of getting used to it. See, I

---

[38] AL, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

[39] AL, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

> am a social worker and I interact mostly with British people from different backgrounds in my work, it is not a problem as far as we are accepted, but it is difficult somehow as you know (HA)[40]
>
> The Asians are really fanatics, they do not understand Islam the same way we do, or perform Islam like we do, we are liberal compared to them or to the Saudis, but among us we have the same fanatic people, but I think the culture is different and the practice is different, they do not allow women to pray in the mosques, but that is very normal for us Sudanese, and tell me what is wrong with the church we can get together there as well for Ramadan and our social events why not? (NO)[41]

Sudanese women in the UK are connected to the politics of race and ethnicity that plays an important role in the way in which they came to position themselves in the country. Their race, ethnicity, and religious location, being African-Muslim-Arabic, brings ethnicity, religion, and race into discourses that are always troubled by the Other. The intersection of the various components of Sudanese women's identities is complex because it is difficult to isolate any one component.

UK socio-cultural life is involved in a politics of nation-making that categorizes and constructs the identities of the Other. Field notes:

> The question of African diasporic or African descent immigrants becoming black is the only context in which Euro-immigrants becoming white. ... The real issue is not how immigrants became white or black, but how persons not born and bred to it, whatever their ancestry, became oriented in the Western world of Black and white. [42]

40 HA, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

41 NO, *Interview series 2010–2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010–2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

42 J. B. Field, *Whiteness Racism and Identity. International Labour and Working Class History*, Issue 60, (2001): 48-56, p. 52.

There is no doubt that Sudanese African Muslims became oriented by the sudden encounter with the Western world of Black and White. It is worth mentioning here that the Sudanese women interviewed were mostly puzzled when they were faced with the question of ethnicity in official papers, and tended to tick the box labelled "Other", as it is not possible to claim the two ethnic identities of Arab and African. In Gilroy's words, "The raciological order of the diasporic space deprives Black ethnicities as well as Muslims, and creates norms of exclusions and marginalization".[43]

For Sudanese women, race and ethnic identity, as well as their migrant status as refugees or asylum seekers, seems to transform their perspectives on their own ethnic identity. Women tend to eventually embrace Africanism. Thus, Whiteness in the diasporic space provides endless variations to the theme of race, as mentioned. It transforms an old Arab identity into a new and well-received African identity among these women.

Gilroy notes that, « "Black" and "British" have been positioned as mutually exclusive in the UK, which is why it is difficult to establish the grounds for a new Black British identity, particularly out of refugeedom".[44] The impact of exile on women, in particular, is perceived as a construction of a space that provides women with a sense of independence and freedom.
Exile enhances the trend to build collective identities and to recall home. Women were able to conquer alienation and to build pacts by gathering and organizing events.

The helplessness of the refugee and immigrant categories and groups of people have led to the understanding of refugeedom as a crisis, or Calamity in Gatrell's words. [45] The narratives of the Sudanese women not only embody awareness of the trauma of dislocation, but also portray a great fear of the social consequences of communal disintegration, exclusion, and alienation.

---

[43] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire, Melancholia or Convivial Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

[44] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso. 1993.

[45] Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 2005.

Sudanese women's ongoing journey of displacement plays a critical role in their identity transformation, as exile increases personal autonomy. These are Muslims women with Black identities and, as Sudanese women, they use their narratives to challenge and resist the dominant hegemonic discourses of West Yorkshire. It is because of their Black identity and Islamic religion that they face more challenges and encounters.

Sudanese women's identity illuminates the multi-faceted nature of Islam and challenges the production of a mainstream Islam in the UK, where Muslims are constantly portrayed as one homogenous group. Indeed, Sudanese women are often subjected to multiple forms of racism and exposed to the reality that racism is institutional in the country, whereby mosques are off limits for African. As such, it has become imperative to problematize such suppositions and to present accounts of diverse and alternative lived experiences of an African and Muslim subject.

Conclusion

Sudanese African Muslim women's identity has undergone specific transformation in the diasporic space of the UK. As African Muslim women, they are exposed to alternative performativities of Muslimness and to a more rigid structure of Islam. They negotiate their own space from within the traditions of both their homeland and that of the host society. For the Sudanese community, every religious place is a holy place, and Sudanese Muslims can comfortably settle with the idea and practice of holding prayers and religious feasts and occasions in churches across the UK, in contrast to other Muslim communities in the UK.

This article has discussed, debated, and contemplated ideas of Muslimness and the religious performativities of Sufi-Islam versus the mainstream Islam in the UK, capturing the diasporic experiences and encounters of African Sudanese Muslim women, their history, and their Sufi-Islam/popular Islam. Moreover, this article has levied a call to decolonize the dominant and hegemonic Islamic discourse of the mainstream Islam in the UK. One form of resisting the hegemonic Muslim experience formed by the mainstream Islam is to set examples of the multi-faceted nature of Islam and revisit the history, agency, and roots of the diverse Islamic doctrine, cultures, performances, and places.

Identities authorized in British policies exclude minority identities, particularly Black, and alienates Muslims and Islam. African identities are a threat to the nation, thus, the African Sudanese Muslim women's position is problematized in the UK. This has been reflected in the social policy and practices on immigration, asylum, and nationality that reflect high levels of anxiety and instability.

The experiences of immigrants explicate the significance of race and ethnicity as a basis for exclusion and inclusion, and its intersection with hybridity, identity, and race. Within this, religion has historically been, and continues to be, a volatile space. Sufism, gender, and Islam in Sudan and in West Yorkshire are no different.

An articulation of what being a womn in Africa in general and what they endure through their lives is well presented by Nnaemeka who stresses that, "African women are fighting against two colonialisms, one in the form of internally induced patriarchal structures, and the other in the form of externally engineered imperialist contexts. Both are ever evolving, always contaminated and contested, mutually creating and recreating each other".[46]

[46] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Mapping Africa Feminism Contested Representation, Gender in Africa." In *Readings in Gender in Africa," edited by* Andrea Cornwall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 31–40.

References

Ahmed, Leila. "Early Islam and the Position of Women: The Problem of Interpretation." In *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender,* edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, 58–73. Yale University Press, 1991. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkp33.8.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam, Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992/2021.

Ahmed, Sara. Claudia Castada, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller. (ed) *Uprootings/Regroundings Questions of Home and Migration*. Routledge, 2003.

Ahmed, Shahad. *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton /Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

AL, HA, HW, NA, and NO. *Interview Series 2010 - 2011*. Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010–2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

Al-Rasheed, Ameena. *Alternative performativities of Muslimness, the intersection of gender race and migration.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Al-Shahi, Ahmed." Sufism in Modern Islam." In *Islam in the Modern World RLE Politics of Islam,* edited by Denis MacEoin, and Ahmed Al-Shahi, London: Routledge Press, 1983.

An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed, edited by, Mashood A. Baderin. *Islam and Human Rights: Selected Essays of Abdullahi An-Na'im (1st ed.).* London: Routledge. 2006. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251790.

Badran, Margot. "Competing A gender Feminisms, Islam and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Egypt." In *Women Islam and The State,* edited by Deniz. Kandiyoti, 176–200. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

Baffoun, Alya. "Women and Social Change in the Muslim Arab World," *Women's Studies International, Forum,* 5, no.2, (1982): 227–242.

Baldock, John. *The Essence of Sufism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Beck, Lois and Keddie, Nikki. *Women in the Muslim World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979/1991.

Bernal, Victoria. “Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic ‘Tradition’ in a Sudanese Village.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History 36,* no. 1 (1994): 36–67. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500018880.

Bonino, Stefano. “Visible Muslimness in Scotland: Between Discrimination and Integration.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49*,* no.4 (2015): 367–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1066978.

Costa, Yakup. “Turkish and Pakistani Muslim Communities in Britain; A Comparative Approach.” *The Journal of International Social Research* 27, no. 6 (2013): 178–184.

CRASSH. Seeing Muslimness: An interdisciplinary conference. Accessed June 18, 2024. https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/41566/

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex.* Translated by. Ed H. M. Parshley. 1952. New York: Bantam, 1961.

Fábos, Anita. “Resisting Blackness, Embracing Rightness: How Muslim Arab Sudanese Women Negotiate Their Identity in the Diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35*,* no. 2 (2011): 218–37. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.592594.

Fields, Barbara J. “Whiteness, Racism, and Identity.” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 60 (2001): 48–56. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004410.

Gatrell, Peter. *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.

Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire, Melancholia or Convivial Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Hale, Sondra. *Gender Politics in Sudan Islamism, Socialism, and The State*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Hutson, Alaine S. "Women Men and Patriarchal Bargaining, In an Islamic Sufi Order, The Tiganiyya in Kano, Nigeria 1937 to the Present." *Gender and Society* 15, no. 5 (2001): 734–753.

IPSOS Social Research Institute - A Review of Survey Research on Muslims in the UK. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-03/a- review-of-survey- research-on-muslims-in-great-britain-ipsos_0.pdf

Johnson, Azeezat. 2017. "Getting Comfortable to Feel at Home: Clothing Practices of Black Muslim Women in Britain." *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no.2 (2017): 274–87. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1298571.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Women and Rural Development Policies.* Brighton: Sussex Institute of Development Studies, 1988.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. *Women Islam and The State*. Philadelphia: Templet University Press, 1991.

Karamustafa, Ahmet. "Islam: A civilizational Project and in Progress." In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism,* edited by Omid Safi, 98–110, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.

Keddie, Nikki R., and Beth Barron, eds. *Women in Middle Eastern History; Shifting boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkp33.

MacEoin, Denis and Ahmed Al-Shahi. *Islam in the Modern World.* London/Canberra: Croom Helm,1983

Mazrui, Ali A. "African Islam and Islam in Africa: Between Exceptionalism and Marginality." *American Journal of Islam and Society* 26, no.3 (2009): i–xi. https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v26i3.1380

Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1975.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Women and Islam an Historical Theological Inquiry.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Modood, Tariq, and Fauzia Ahmad. "British Muslim Perspectives on Multiculturalism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 187–213. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075005.

Mozaffari, Mehdi. "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no.1, (2007): 17–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760601121622

Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Mapping Africa Feminism Contested Representation, Gender in Africa." In *Readings in Gender in Africa*," edited by Andrea Cornwall, 31–40. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Salih, Mohamed. *African Democratization and African Politics.* London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical dimension of Islam.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Stiansen, Endre and Michael Kevane, eds. *Kordofan Invaded, Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*. Leiden: Brill. 1998.

Sudarkasa, Niara. *The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies; Essays and Speeches.* Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996.

Umar, Muhammad Sani. "Changing Islamic Identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the1980s From Sufism to Anti-Sufism." In *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa,* edited by Louis. Brenner, 154–178. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

UNICEF, *Mena Gender Equality Profile*, 2022. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/reports/global-annual-results-report-2022-gender-equality

Visel, Robin E. "Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines," *Ariel* 19, no.4 (1988): 33–42.

Willimse, Karin. *One Foot in Heaven; Narratives on Gender and Islam in Darfur West Sudan.* Leiden/Boston: Brill 2007.

"[Obeah] *Ọbịa* by Igbo Spelling:"[1] Affirming the Value of *After God is Dibịa* by John A. Umeh

Claudette A. Anderson[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Claudette A. Anderson, Ph.D. is Executive Director and Professor of *Ọbịa* at Unụchi Foundation, an Afro-Atlantic Religious Reparations Resource nonprofit. Her research focuses on African indigenous systems of knowledge and African-derived religions in the Anglophone Caribbean.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Unụchi Foundation. Florida. USA.
claudette.andersoni@respellingobeah.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8297-6770

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/mxnj5732

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the demonization of Africana Religious Traditions (ARTs), peoples of African descent, in shame and ignorance, and seduced by the benefits of a ruthless capitalist Christianity, fail to affirm the value of their ancestral spirituality. In Jamaica and other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean, the word "Obeah", a label for African spirituality, remains misunderstood, demonized, and criminalized as Christians consistently thwart any effort to value it. *Dibịa*-Professor Umeh's spiritual oeuvre provides necessary redress to the epistemicide that fuels the continued criminalization of "Obeah". This article presents John Umeh's *After God is Dibịa: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria,* Vols. 1 and 2 as performative texts that affirm traditional African Priesthood as honorable, valuable, and necessary, while negating the myth of a superior white male god and consequent female inferiority. I explore these acts of writing the Igbo *Dibịahood* as sacred performances of testimony, communion and redemption. The emphasis on *Dibịa* ethics, I posit as offering a critique of Christian priestcraft. African defined *Ọbịa* rejects eurocentric impositions on the term by affirming it as a healing vocation and inclusive priesthood defined by wisdom and knowledge. Through attention to the feminine space of revival, *Ọbịa balmyard,* I explore similarities with continental antecedents and present female *Dibịahood* as a radical faith tradition that insists on the power of *Nne Agwu*, Mother Holy Spirit. The respell of *Ọbịa* through eight emanations is shown as a potent antidote against epistemicide. By affirming the sacredness of matriarchal power, the dignity of traditional *Dibịahood* and the ethical force of traditional knowledge, Umeh exemplifies a priest class worthy of the name.

KEYWORDS
obeah, African traditional religion, women's spirituality, *Dibịa, Ọbịa,* Reparations

Introduction:

In Jamaica, "Obeah," (English spelling) remains criminalized under The Obeah Law of 1898. "Obeah" was first criminalized in Jamaica in 1760 by an "Act to Remedy the Evils arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves" and

[1] John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria.* Vol. 1 (London: Karnak House, 1997), 80.

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

this Act, that was "also to prevent their possessing arms and ammunition, and going from place to place without tickets",[2] added religious persecution to physical and psychological bondage. Generally misunderstood and stigmatized in the Anglophone Caribbean, the term "Obeah" is attributed to any engagement with African spirituality and viewed largely as the practice of spiritual malevolence. The call for decriminalization, attendant to a more nuanced understanding of the term, is negated by Christian zealots and a corresponding lack of political will. Even against the backdrop of a Reparations Movement advocating for "religious engagement" programs to "neutralize the void created by slave voyages and the forced destruction of the history and culture",[3] Obeah continues to be condemned by eurocentrism. The ingrained hostility and official reluctance to take African spirituality seriously is not only indicative of the retardation of the Africana mind by its most recent brutal encounter with racist Europeans, but also, paradoxically, signals the need for a non-secular, Afri-oriented approach to understanding. This need for a continental African cosmological lens exponentially increases the value of authentic representations of African traditional religions (ATRs) to the post-slavery islands of the Caribbean. Accordingly, I articulate an Igboan rendering of *Ọbịa* as remedy for the epistemicide occasioned by Eurocentrism. This paper presents John Anenechukwu Umeh's *After God is Dibịa: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria* Vols. 1 and 2 as performative texts that affirm traditional African *Dibịahood* as honorable, valuable, and necessary while negating the myth of a superior white male god and consequent female inferiority.

The oeuvre of *Dibịa* Professor, John A. Umeh, provides for an understanding of *Ọbịa* within the context of Igboan knowledge-craft. Using Igbo traditional religion as a gateway to *Ọbịa* makes Africana Obeah more accessible and understandable, allowing us to positively recognize Obeah, which constitutes "respelling Obeah". Additionally, respelling Obeah allows for scholars of Africana religion to formulate a theology of *Ọbịa*, bringing it out

---

[2] The Act, which was drafted late 1760 after the end of the Tacky Rebellion, became effective on June 1, 1761. The section on "Obeah" reads in part, "And in order to prevent the many Mischiefs that may hereafter arise from the wicked Art of Negroes going under the appellation of Obeah Men and Women." See *Acts of Assembly.*

[3] Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC), 10 Point Action Plan. https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/August 2, 2023.

from the underground and the realm of negative invisible into the visible sacred. Apart from affirming the value of traditional Igbo spirituality, this privileging of an Igbo-African understanding of *Ọbịa* offers insight into the virtue of a gender inclusive priesthood, equally affirming woman as the first *Dibịa/Ọbịa*, *Ọbịa* as the original Goddess Religion, and its revolutionary existence in the diaspora as a radical religious faith tradition. Furthermore, an objective focus on *Ọbịa* affords a recognition of *Dibịa* as the existential ground of human existence, that is, a becoming that calls African women of faith away from the struggle for a place of honor in phallic steepled towers back to the future of an African sacred science that posits the supreme being *Chukwu Abịàmà* as an androgyne force of knowledge and wisdom and testifies that the Holy Spirit, *Nne Agwụ,* is female.

Some 250,000 Igbos, the largest number of Igbos transported to any colony, came into Jamaica by way of the British slave trade of Africans.[4] The comparative lack of discrete retentions coupled with conventional focus on Coromantee/Akan has overshadowed the Igbo contribution to Afro-Jamaican culture. This paper focuses on the continental Igbo conception of *Ọbịa* as an expatriate *Dibịa,* coupled with attention to Africana *Ọbịa* as understood by enslaved Africans in pre-treaty and pre-emancipation Jamaica, and by twenty-first century practitioners with whom I communed during fieldwork. The seminal works attended to in this paper, in addition to personal conversations with *Dibịa* Umeh, have been instrumental in shaping this presentation of "*Ọbịa* by Igbo spelling". The paper is equally guided by questions posed by Revival Modda V (now deceased), a Kingston practitioner, who urged me to return to the community and make known my research findings. She expressed frustration with her own ignorance of her inherited tradition, noting that her practice was inadequate because her knowledge was incomplete. We proceed, therefore, not with a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the texts, but by showing how valuable the texts are in answering some of the basic questions about *Ọbịa*. Modda V insisted that, within the construct of *Ọbịa* as both powerful healing and spiritual malevolence, there must be some coherent objective understanding that can be embraced with courage and not fear, with pride and not self-loathing.

What can we truthfully tell our children when they ask, "What is *Ọbịa?*", "Why is it spelt and pronounced in different ways?", "How is *Ọbịa* related to Spirit

4 See for example, Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier* and https://www.slavevoyages.org.

and the types of healing that women do?". These questions from the diaspora provide the framework for an evaluation of *Dibịa* Umeh's work as a cultural custodian and mediator between worlds. It is for Modda V and others like her that these volumes are written. It is these genuine seekers, whose inheritance is a fractured tradition, who will find value in Umeh's offering of an occult philosophy written in coded language with the answers hiding in plain sight along the seams of contradictions and subtleties. The volumes will help Africana practitioners understand why, even in their inadequacy, they are called *Ọbịa* and why in pre-Christian Igboland, they would be "*Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas*".

"For *Dibịas* and Potential *Dibịas*"[5]

In my first conversation with Prof Umeh about the two-volume exposition, he was emphatic about his intended audience; "Claudette, these books are written for *Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas*; they are not novels".[6] In this sentence lies the significance, uniqueness, and value of *After God is Dibịa.* In these volumes, we have*,* for the first time, an authoritative twentieth century continental account of *Ọbịa,* written by a *Dibịa/Ọbịa* for *Ndị Dibịa.* Umeh is an expert who defines the word and affirms the tradition:

> My case study is Igbo *Dibia* into whose membership I was duly admitted since 1947… after undergoing the rigours and disciplines that go with it after due authentication of requisite spiritual selection.[7]

The *Dibịa* writes "as an African who is deeply involved in and firmly committed to traditional African knowledge and wisdom that predated and ushered in written history as well as post literacy … into the world", and not "as a pretentious African who is writing to please his doubting foreign master".[8] The authority of *After God is Dibịa* is declared in the statement: "I have written what I am permitted to write down".[9]

Written for *Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas,* the two-volume exposition of *Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria* is generally

5 *"Dibịas*" is the Anglicized version of "*Ndị Dibịa",* the plural form of *Dibịa.*
6 John Umeh. Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, January 2022.
7 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 1:ii
8 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 1:ii.
9 *Ibid,* 1:iii.

inaccessible to the uninitiated or *Óféké.* The writing, previously forbidden, becomes necessary with the rapid and significant loss of traditional knowledge caused by epistemicide. In bemoaning the unrelenting epistemicide, *Dibịa* Umeh reiterates that the books are meant for decades-long serious study, stating that "one has to read the books over and over again *to begin to get the meaning*" (emphasis mine). The *Dibịa* as a cultural custodian, places his tradition within the realm of the sacred sciences and the necessary unveiling as cultural preservation and transmission. This writing for *Ndị Dibịa* is not academic, nor is it for academics or meant to entertain. Rather, the books' contents are "well-kept and jealously guarded secrets of Igbo *Dibịas* from the very beginning of times".[10] Therefore, the books are primarily codexes meant, not only to document ancient wisdom, but also to complement modern initiations. In citing the primacy of traditional oral culture as post-literacy, Umeh more than hints that his necessary scribal treatment of *Ọbịa*, as an artefact of the Euro-American literary tradition, is a regression and, as such, makes an already challenging subject more difficult. In this writing by *Dibịa* for *Ndị Dibịa* and potential *Ndị Dibịa,* Umeh writes for Igbos at home and abroad and is substantiated in his office as a cultural custodian.

In two volumes, twenty chapters and an author's preface, we get more than a glimpse of holistic living before European impoverishment. The volumes begin with a statement of truth, "*Ézí Ókwú bụ Ndụ/Okwu asị bụ ọnwụ"* ("Truth is Life/Falsehood is Death") and ends with a maxim, "*A na-esi n'anya Dibịa àfụ M̄mụọ"* ("One sees the Spirit through the *Dibịa*'s eyes"). Citing the works as a necessary and conscious marriage of "arts, sciences, technology, metaphysics, occult, philosophy, cosmology, literature, *ogwu,* music, poetry, cosmogony, and so on",[11] Umeh treats fundamental aspects of Igbo culture including the Igbo Traditional Calendar or *Ògụ́àfọ̀ Igbo* (Ch. 7), "Afa Divination: Ákpukpálá/Uğílí" (Ch. 10), and "The Language of Prayer" (Ch. 15). The intimate relationship between *Dibịa* (Ch. 4), *Agwu* (Ch. 5), and *Chukwu* (Ch. 6) is explained as fundamental, with cover images of both volumes being coded representations. Various elements of *Dibịa* medicine, such as water (Ch. 12), herbs (Ch. 13), and breath (Ch. 19), are treated. The first volume, compiled of six chapters, discusses major conceptual foundations and the second volume, presenting fourteen chapters,

[10] *Ibid,*1:i.
[11] *Ibid,*1:iii.

addresses cultural practices. After outlining "Igbo Experts and the place of *Dibịa*" in Chapter 3, Umeh gives a detailed representation of *Dibịa* in Chapter 4 while "Igbo Humour concerning Dibịa". "Dibịa's Feats", and the "Ethics of Dibịa" are treated in Chapters 16, 17, and 20 respectively. These five chapters, specifically, relate to *Ndị Dibịa* and provide a wealth of previously unavailable information.

Detailed explanations of numbers reveal their metaphysical nature as cosmic codes. Indeed, nature is conceived of as the greatest teacher with truth being inseparable from nature itself. The human life cycle is defined in terms of *Olisa*, the mystical tide of the universe, where *kalma-kalma* (karma) is the balancing energy. The advent of the patriarchal age and the dominance of one ethnic group over another is considered part and parcel of *Olisa.* Within this construct, we are advised to operate with tolerance, to "live and let live", allowing every bird to perch. Igbo traditional culture renders our journey on earth a holiday from spirit land or pure consciousness, and our purpose, the be-coming of our best self, is rendered as a quest for God's name. In Chapter 11, the "Traditional Recipe for Longevity & Good Health" is described in poetic terms:

> If your mouth doesn't kill you
> if your throat doesn't kill you
> if your penis doesn't kill you
> you are sure to achieve longevity
> attain very old age and wear age-cataract.[12]

In Chapter 8, "AFA Mystical 'O' and the Early Achievement of Post Literacy in Igboland", the *Dibịa* corrects the misconception that the Igbos were an illiterate people before colonization. Asserting that more than 18 modes of writing "clearly establish the Igbo people as a very early highly literate society able to read and write using their traditional methods",[13] Umeh teaches us the words "*Ide",* which means to write, and "*Ikwu"* which is to programme.[14] We are further challenged to engage with the fact that expertise in "Ikwu

[12] John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria.* Vol. 2 (London: Karnak House, 1999a), 103.
[13] Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 2:56.
[14] *Ibid,* 2:56.

writing system … catapulted the Igbo people and their civilisation into the post-literacy which the computer is today trying to launch other races".[15]

The indispensability of music to healing is captured in the title of Chapter 14, "Égwú Ọgwụ (Ọgwụ Music)" or medicine music. "Songs, chants, incantations, dances, vocals, instrumentals, humming, whistling", [16] are examples of sounds that play a major role in the work of *Ndi Dibịa,* and the chapter offers lyrics as well as stories of musical healing. The Igboism, "Music, my Chi and I came together/Music, my Chi and I will go back home together",[17] renders sound a divine force and mystic principle of planetary life. The subject of evil is treated in Chapter 18, entitled "Evil Forces and Evil Ones". In this short, four-page chapter, Umeh rescues "*Ekwensu*… the beautiful one"[18] from demonization. We are assured, unequivocally, that *Ekwensu* is not the devil as was originally translated by European orthographers. Stating that, "it is indeed a ridiculous absurdity for any Igbo person to talk of *Ekwensu* as a devil or an evil spirit",[19] Umeh allows us to praise *Ekwensu* as "the beautiful one at rest", "the expeller of evil spirits", "the giver of oracles", and "the beautiful eagle". "Confirmed to be one of the benevolent lunar deities,[20], akin to Khonsu/Thoth of Egypt, *Ekwensu* is, in esoteric terms, the "Child of the God of Light".[21] The discrediting of the mistranslation and now accepted definition of *Ekwensu* as the devil exposes the entrenched epistemicide occasioned by European colonization. In providing *Igbo-riginals* in the form of prayers, greetings, chants, kola-nut communion, jokes, and the *Ọfọ* staff of truth, which kills the liar, Umeh insists on the value of non-Christian modes of spirituality and exposes the inadequacy of Christian praxis.

Umeh's offering of knowledge and wisdom is also a testimony to the sacredness of the pre-colonial value system (*Omenala).* Umeh offers us knowledge of *Dibịa* as mystic traveller and sacred sojourner, one who comes and goes, and does not proselytize about a savior, but rather, works to be that savior for suffering humanity. He restores the traditional value of *Ọbịa*,

15 *Ibid,* 2:56.
16 *Ibid,* 2:137.
17 *Ibid,* 2:137.
18 *Ibid,* 2:196.
19 *Ibid,* 2:197.
20 *Ibid,* 2:197.
21 *Ibid,* 2:197.

offering pre-Eurocentric meanings and praxis. *Ọbịa* practitioners in the Diaspora whose cultural and spiritual practices were considered devil worship will find merit in Umeh's disclosure of continental antecedents to their practice. The sentence, "the Igbo *Dibia* surfaces in America and the Caribbean as *Obeah* (*Obia* by Ig(b)o spelling)"[22] affirms the *Dibịa* in his role as mediator and redeemer. The books are the existential middle ground that, in their self-reflexivity, wrest *Ọbịa* from the tyranny of Eurocentrism and redeem its value to and for Africana. Through Umeh, we learn that the word "*Ọbịa",* in continental Igbo worldview, is a person and not a practice. Furthermore, we learn that the *Ọbịa* person is a *Dibịa* on a healing mission. We understand that the *Dibịa* is considered next to God and that one cannot be *Dibịa* (enlightened) without *Nne Agwụ* (The Mother Holy Spirit). We learn that the tonality of the Igbo language renders four basic meanings to a single word, confirming the sacredness of the Igbo language as tetragrammaton. And finally, we learn that *After God is Dibịa,* and that the *Ọbịa* is a *Dibịa* who says "*mbịa / mbịa ọgwụ"* (meaning, "I come / I come with medicine" or "I am coming / I am coming with medicine").

The Person, *Ọbịa* by Igbo Spelling

> When an Igbo *Dibia* is said to have gone on *Ọbịa* or *Mbia / Mbia Ọgwụ* it means that he/she has left his/her present home to practice his/her *Dibia* profession in another land or society.[23]

It is an uncontested fact that "the Igbo *Dibia* [was] established in the Caribbeans (and America) as *Obia* man (spelt "obeah" by the English)".[24] Less known is that "*Obia* [is the] Igbo name for a *Dibịa* who has gone on itinerant practice in other lands".[25] In Igboland, Nigeria, *Ọbịa* translates to mean visitor, guest, and/or stranger and is simultaneously a way of saying "he/she/it has come". The verb "*bịa*" means to come. The article "*O*", conceived as a mystical pronoun, references everything in existence, that is, both human (s/he) *and* non-human (it*).* "*Onye Ọbịa*" means "the one who comes". Because the act of arrival at one place necessitates departure from another, *"bịa"* is also implicitly understood as meaning "to go". The term is

---

22 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa*, 1:80.

23 John Anenechukwu Umeh. *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area*. (Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co. 1999b), 28.

24 Umeh, *Igbo People,* 28.

25 *Ibid,* 28.

also used to denote entertainment, *"Kà m nee ya Ọbịa"/*"Let me entertain him", and visitation, "*Enwèlụm onyẹ Ọbịa"*/"I have a visitor".[26] Synonyms of note are the terms "alien" and "stranger", "sojourner" and "traveler". For the itinerant *Dibịa*, his/her journeying constitutes a mission, that is, it is the conscious choice of one who has been sent for. The person *Ọbịa* goes because he/she has been asked to come.[27] In the early records from Barbados, we learn that "no Negro…can doe anything of this [*Ọbịa*], only those that are brought from the coast of Africa and chiefly the Calamale Negros".[28] While *Ndị Dibịa* apprentices may have ended up on slave ships,[29] Umeh notes that the comings and goings of *Dibịa* was achieved by mystical travel. He cites mystical travel as common among *Ndị Dibia,* stating that it has been practiced from "very ancient times when *Dibịa* vast in the knowledge and practice of mystic travellings of *ikwu ekili* or *ikwu eli* or *ide nde* or *ibi ibuo* went to various parts of the world to provide services to suffering humanity".[30] These mystic travels of the *Ọbịa* are recorded in the legends of the flying Africans. The frequent sea voyages, mystic travels, and high death rate that characterized plantation slavery meant that, for enslaved Africans/Igbos, the world of plantation slavery was *Ọbịa* and the *Dibịa* as *Ọbịa* was not only the person coming to help them, but also the person who had expert knowledge in the comings and goings on the land and planet earth.

This is the meaning of *Dibịa* as a shortened form of *Dibiala*[31] and references the *Dibịa* in his role as a cosmic engineer and astrologer and an expert in

[26] See Williamson, 2006.
[27] John Umeh. Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, January 2022.
[28] Walduck quoted in Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby. "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 22, no.2 (2001): 90.
[29] See Usuanlele 2016.
[30] Umeh, *Igbo People,* 29.
[31] Patrick Iroegbu. "Igbo Medicine and Culture: The Concept of Dibia and Dibia Representation in Igbo Society of Nigeria." Accessed January 18, 2018. http://chatafrik.com/articles/health-and-welfare/igbo-medicine-and-culture-the-concept-of-dibia-and-dibia-representation-in-igbo-society-of-nigeria.

land/estate management.[32] *Dibiala* is one "who has a deep knowledge and skills of holding a land and its people for peace and growth".[33] *Dibiala* is a

> healer ascribed with the power and authority to welcome and direct the things of the land through rights of kinship cohesion fecundity and progress. The suffix *bia* from *di* then means ability to welcome and direct events, life courses and order of a society.[34]

Ndị Dibịa, in their mastery of knowledge and wisdom, operate with God-like omniscience and omnipotence with a sole injunction: a prohibition against changing destiny. It is said that *Dibịa áhá-ágwọ Ọnatalụ Chi/Dibịa* does not cure or solve fate or destiny. These varied descriptions of *Ndị Dibịa* "connotes more than medicine and healing, they were the elites and intellectuals who held and guarded the knowledge base of the Igbo people".[35] Igbo traditional society was divided into *Dibịa* and *Óféké* (non-*Dibịa*) and this emphasis on knowing as the paramount human faculty rendered it more than a divine attribute, therefore, "After God is *Dibịa*"*.*

Dibịa comes after God in Igbo culture because in the most literal sense, "*bịa*" is derived from *Abịama,* the word for God or the Supreme Being: "The Igbos call (God) *Abia Ama,* that is, the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself",[36] they call *Dibịa* "the *Adept* or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom".[37] *Abịama* is also *Chukwu Abịama,* the Great Spirit (*Chi-Ukwu*) of Revealed Knowledge and Wisdom and "*Chukwu welu Olu Dibịa*/After God is *Dibịa*"*.* The highest conception of the *Dibịa* is as one who is "in possession of, [and] an adept in occult, esoteric, recondite and hidden knowledge and

---

32 Umeh notes that *Dibịa* as an Academic has a distinguished career in matters of the land: "He has pioneered in the establishment of degree and postgraduate programs in Estate Management in Nigeria as well as in the establishment of a Faculty of Environmental Studies at the University of Nigeria." He has "served several terms as Dean of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, and several terms, as Head of Estate Management". See *The Igbo People.*

33 *Iroegbu,* "Igbo Medicine."

34 *Ibid.*

35 Nze Chukwukadibia Nwafor, *Leopards of the Magical Dawn: Science and the Cosmological Foundations of Igbo Culture*. Morrisville, NC, USA: Lulu Press Inc, 2014), 22.

36 "Himself" is used by the author for convenience.

37 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:76.

wisdom".[38] *Ndị Dibịa* is defined primarily in terms of cognition, that is, they are the embodiment of, and experts in knowledge and wisdom. In terms of spirit, they can see the invisible. It is explained that "*Dibịa* is made-up of two words *Di* and *Abịa* meaning the Master of or the Expert in Knowledge and Wisdom".[39] Umeh describes the profession of *Ndị Dibịa* as a "Knowledge-Craft" and offers sacred science as cognitive science. *Ndị Dibịa* is defined not just by the possession and embodiment of knowledge, but by a particularly singular approach or use of this knowledge, which is to reveal it. Such revelation is, in turn, deemed *Ọgwụ* (medicine defined as the ultimate solution), substantiating the aphorism "knowledge is medicine". In this sense, we may call *Ndị Dibịa* gnostic revealers and within Igbo cosmology, this special faculty constitutes an identification with God.

The terms, "priest", "doctor", and "healer" that are often used to reference *Dibịa* are shown to be inadequate. In particular, a priest of the Christian faith is understood to be one of the three orders of ordained ministry whose chief role is to offer sacrifice.[40] Additionally, in terms of hierarchy, a Christian priest is not "next to God", but, rather, is positioned between the Bishop and Deacon. Importantly, a Christian priest lacks spiritual power; their vocation stems from knowledge of one written book and their ability to expound on its contents. Western worldviews undermine the ability to grasp concepts encoded in *asùsụ Igbo,* resulting in much of Igbo being lost in translation. For this very reason, the very first words of *After God is Dibịa* state that *Dibịa* is "a terminology which does not have an English equivalent".[41] In emphasizing the absence of an English equivalent to *Dibịa,*[42] the cultural custodian reminds his peers of the holistic nature of *Dibịa* work. He cautions them to resist the strict categorization that frames Western worldviews:

[38] Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:i.
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] See Stravinskas, *Catholic Encyclopedia,* 781.
[41] Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:i.
[42] This non-equivalence is seen in the demotion of Zacharias Caries, the first Moravian Missionary to Jamaica, who was initially called Obea, but lost this designation when he was unable to stop the rape of congregants by the slavocracy and failed to alleviate hunger during a period of famine. Monk Lewis, a planter-priest, in commenting on the enslaved's disinterest in Christianity, confessed in his diary entry of March 22, 1816, that "indeed, I am afraid that 1 am indebted for the chief part of my present auditory to my quality of massa rather than that of priest."

> To call [*Dibịa*] a traditional Doctor is to straitjacket him or her…To call *Dibia* a herbalist is to pick up a drop from the Ocean and call it the Ocean. Similarly, calling the *Dibia* a psychologist or healer or destroyer of witches or mender of bones or any such single or a group of activities, would fall seriously short of the full meaning. *Dibia* is holistic and so is knowledge and wisdom. *They have no end…*[43]

Dibịa is identified with the invisible air and the ancestral masquerade.[44] *Dibịa* is the one who, with the help of *Nne Agwụ,* is able to achieve "expertise in several fields of endeavour simultaneously".[45] *Ndị Dibịa,* as the source of medicine, *Ọgwụ,* or the ultimate solution, "controlled all facets of socio-political, economic, cultural, religious, moral or spiritual life of the people and individuals or groups".[46] The holistic knowledge that informed the oracular nature of *Dibịa* work became imperative for enslaved Africans.

In Chapter Four, entitled "*Dibịa*"*,* Umeh opens the world of *Dibịa.* It is world of masked knowledge, of mysterious norms; a world unattainable to the mundane mind and closed to the materialist; a world defined by the mastery of things invisible. It is a world attended by axioms such as: "*Ọnụ Dibịa, bụ Ọnụ Mmụọ,* the mouth of the Dibịa is the mouth of the spirit"; "*Dibịa bụ Agbara, Dibịa is a god*"; "*A na-esi n'anya Dibịa afụ Mmụọ*, One sees the Spirit through the *Dibịa*'s eyes"; "*Dibịa bụ Ikuku amaro ebe isi ya na ọdụ ya dị, Dibịa* is the air or wind in the universe of which no one can fathom the head or tail"; *Atọsaa mmanwụ afu Mmụọ; Dibia* is a Spirit masquerading in human flesh";[47] "*Dibịa aha-agwọ Ọnatalụ Chi/Dibịa* does not cure or solve fate or destiny".[48] We learn that "*Dibịa dị n'àhụ/Dibịa* is in the body"[49] meaning that *Dibịa*'s "makeup is spiritual and physical", he/she being "born with special abilities and faculties".[50] The high office of *Ndị Dibịa* is gender inclusive and throughout his works, Umeh shows great reverence for female *Dibịas.*

---

43 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:74.
44 An ancestral masquerade is called "Jonkonnu" in Jamaica.
45 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:74.
46 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:75.
47 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:76-77.
48 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:86.
49 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:81.
50 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:81.

The specialness of *Ndị Dibịa,* of which there are two major types, is to be found (among other attributes) in a triad of extrasensory perception, namely: potent eyes, *ịfụ ụzọ;* potent hand, *Aka ile*; and potent mouth, *Ọnụ Àtụ.*[51] The *Dibịa*'s potent eyes allow for extraordinary vision. His/her potent hand effects healing and makes *Ọgwụ* /holistic medicine. The potent mouth of *Ndị Dibịa* speaks Truth as the literal word of God. Of great importance is the relationship of *Ndị Dibịa* with *Nne Agwụ*, the Holy Spirit, for the *Dibịa* is someone chosen and possessed by *Agwụ,* the Holy Spirit, and *Dibịa* classification is determined by *Agwụ.* The two types of *Dibịa* are *Nne Agwụ Ndị Dibịa (*Mother *Agwụ Dibịa)* and *Ebo Agwụ Dibịa* (Lineage *Dibịa).* A Lineage *Dibịa* is one who attains the profession through inheritance. This can be through either or both his or her maternal and paternal line and can lead to specialization in one or more aspects of *Ọgwụ.* Mother Holy Spirit *Ndị Dibịa* are those chosen by her to become *Dibịa,* usually through some form of spirit possession and/or recognized significant events.

The holistic functions of *Ndị Dibịa* are of two classifications: *Ọgwụ* (medicine) and *Aja* (sacrifice). An appreciation of the fact that "what kills, saves, and what saves, kills"[52] (a well-known Igbo axiom), is central to grasping the ten aspects of Igbo traditional medicine. Nine aspects may be understood as positive and/or neutral, while the tenth, "*Ikọ Nsị /Ikụ Nsị* or the firing/shooting of psychic missiles or occult poisons*",* is more equivocal. It is the *Ikọ Nsị* aspect of Igbo traditional medicine that is considered negative. *Agha Ọgwụ* or war medicine, which allows for flight, invisibility, bullet-deflection, and increased speed (among other manoeuvres), includes the use of *Ikọ Nsị.* These "psychic missiles or occult poisons" are the weapons of revolt used by *Ndi Ọbịa* against the slavocracy in the cause of freedom and came to define the entire profession as "Obeah." However, the following aspects form the bulk of the practice:

1. *Igba Afa* (Divination including oracles and prophecies)
2. *Inye Ọgwụ* (herbal medication)
3. *Igba Ọkpụkpụ* (orthopaedic practices)
4. *Ichụ Àjà* (sacrifices and propitiation)
5. *Iku Ume Udu* (breathing the breath of life)

[51] Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:81.
[52] Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,*1:87.

6. *Ime or Igwọ Ọgwụ* (mystical, occult and magical feats and practices)
7. *Iha ma ọ bụ Iji Mmili* (control of weather and seasons)
8. *Nkụkwapụ* (magical batting off)
9. *Nkpọkwapụ* (spiritual knocking over or knocking off)

The above practices are conducted within the context of selflessness and respect, of holding *Ọfọ,* and *Omenala,* and an oath taken by

> the *Dibịa* to abide strictly by ethical principles of live and let live, not only in his or her relationships with fellow *Ndị Dibịa* but also in the handling of clients, clients' problems and then in the handling of all that exists in the universe.[53]

Umeh emphasizes that addressing various forms of evil is

> not child's play…you have to have thorough knowledge of them, of how to handle, control, or stop them, control and stop evil acts; you cannot cure or control or stop something you don't know about.[54]

This ability to know good and evil is part of the very definition of *Dibịa.* This divine faculty of *Ndị Dibịa* is encapsulated in the epigram "*Ọgwụgwọ nyịá m, ọkụkụ nyịá m, abuzịkwọ m, Dibịa?*" which asks, "If I am unable to offer saving services or negative services of releasing psychotronic missiles, what then would be the basis for my answering [to the name] *Dibịa*?".[55] By this statement we come to understand why *Ọbịa* is known as both powerful healing and spiritual malevolence in Jamaica. It is often said that "one man's meat is another man's poison", and for the slavocracy, *Ọbịa*'s potency was bitter poison for their dehumanizing greed. For *Ndị Dibịa,* the power to both heal and harm comes with *Alo,* the staff of heavy responsibility. Additionally, the refrain *Ọfọ na Ogu* endorses *Ọfọ Dibịa,* the *Dibịa*'s staff of office (by which he stands firmly on truth, justice, and fairness), to follow *Ogu,* esoterically "a branch of forgiveness".

The work/s of offering, "saving services or negative services of releasing psychotronic missiles", is determined by one's spiritual house or lineage and

---

53 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 2:268.
54 John Umeh, Telephone interview by Claudette Anderson, October 2023.
55 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 2:264

"the important thing to know is that one should follow one of the two major divisions of *Dibịa* work".[56] Because of the cosmic nature of the work, those *Ndị Dibịa* who are called to do *Ịko Nsị* or *Ịku ọgwụ* are required to "make love to the ground". This injunction from participation in normal family life ensures the sacredness of the tradition, because "whosoever action results in subsequent punishment of relations and posterity is not a good Dibịa."[57]

> Those that follow *ọkụkụ* in the days gone by were compelled by ethical principles to undergo the public ritual of *iso utu ana*/poking the land (earth Deity) with their penis after which they will neither marry nor procreate. To ensure non-procreation they may, for example, be forced to pull one mystic root (*Obala náàbọ)* in such a way as to pull it to break at its heart-tube (*óhú yá*) after which there is no way they can ever procreate.[58]

Among other things, access to natural law (*Omenala*) along with the trinity of staffs (*Ọfọ, Ogu, Alo)* allows for the determination of truth and right action. The post-Christian notion of the "problem of evil", imported by foreigners, is non-existent for the traditional *Igbo Dibịa* who embodies the fundamental principle of "live and let live". Balance is guaranteed by keeping both spiritual and earthly laws. Igboan justice declares, "Kite should perch/Eagle should perch/Anyone who says the other should not perch/should suffer automatic violent loss of its own wings".[59] Using *Ịkụ Ọgwụ* and *Agha Ọgwụ* [60] (battle/war medicine) against those who refused to let Africans live their lives as they deemed fit is justified in *Omenala*. In fact, it is inevitable. Using *ọkụkụ ọgwụ* (negative medicine*)* to define the person and practice of holistic *Ọbịa* is a metonymic falsehood that sanctions the evils of British slavery. Umeh's oeuvre allows us to correct these epistemic lies.

This writing of Igbo culture from within is a necessary critique of foreign writers as well as indigenes who misrepresent the culture. The epistemicide and cultural degradation caused by British slavery and colonization of traditional cultures has necessitated the regression to written documentation

56 *Ibid,* 2:264.
57 *Ibid,* 2:248.
58 Umeh, *After God is Dibịa,* 2:264.
59 *Ibid,* 2:244.
60 *Ibid,* 2:215.

of post-literate cultures. With colonized Igboland's forced embrace of Christianity and the diaspora's continued struggles with affirmation of the signifier "Obeah," the restorative volumes are a welcome communion with current and future custodians. *Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas* in Jamaica today will recognize themselves in Umeh's distillation of their profession (*Ọbịa* Working), in positive and negative medicine, and as a journey sanctioned and supported by *Nne Agwụ*, Mother Holy Spirit. "Journeying in the Spirit" as part and parcel of "Working *Ọbịa"* is, hereby, affirmed. Umeh's work is invaluable for reminding us that the original Holy Spirit is female, that *Nne Agwụ* is the Holy Spirit of *Ọbịa*. The *Dibịa* profession is always a be-coming. It is the *Ọbịa* that is the existential ground of human existence. It is the *Ọbịa* that is the first *Dibịa,* the first trinity, identified with the Holy Spirit, the divine feminine.

Nne Agwụ,* sacred scars in bushes and *Balmyards

> *Agwu* is referred to as *nne agwu* which would literally mean mother holy spirit, the supreme queen of society and eternity and the ruler of everlastingness*. Nne Agwụ* in Igbo is the totality of *Agwu,* that is the original and complete Mother Holy Spirit.[61]

This divine feminine energy that journeyed with enslaved Africans manifested itself on the island of Jamaica as revolutionary resistance. This "supreme queen of society", *Agwụ*, was ever present on the battlefield, her army of freedom fighters incurring sacred scars in the war against the patriarchal epistemicide. For female *Ndị Ọbịa*, coming to help meant giving birth to new ways of being female and free. Her potent eyes would have to see her people through countless horrors. Her potent hands make new medicines and her sacred tongue speak in new tones. Within the confines of patriarchal terrorism, her insistence on the relevance and power of the Spirit produced innovative spiritualities that bear the scars of their torturous journey. We, therefore, articulate *Ọbịa* as a radical faith tradition, and further as the Black woman's first radical faith tradition in the Anglophone Caribbean. When Africana thinks of radical women's faith, we must begin with the existential battleground of miserable slavery, where women in bushes and on battlefields mothered, fostered, healed, and protected by being and becoming experts in knowledge and wisdom. We must include

[61] *Ibid,*1:111.

those women who continue to practice as outlaws in the *balmyards* of Jamaica and similar spaces. The revolutionary power of *Ọbịa,* as an embodiment of *Nne Agwụ,* the Mother Holy Spirit, transported holistic healing practices that continue to energize *Dibịa*s and potential *Dibịa*s. In Jamaica, positive spiritual practice is associated with women, in part because the most famous *Ọbịa* known during the slave-era was a woman, Grandy Nanny of the Maroons.

Nanny of the Maroons was among the *Ndị Ọbịa* who came to Jamaica in the early 18th century. Of Akan descent, she freed herself and came to live among the Igbo-maroons in what is now the parish of Portland. Radical in her defiance of male authority and in her refusal to sign a treaty with the British that would doom her fellows on the plantation, Nanny became legend. Nanny also became the reference for female *Ndị Ọbịa* to be called mothers and the feminine practice as mothering. Grandy Nanny embodied the mysticism "*Dibịa di n'àhụ*" *(Dibịa* is in the body). Her make-up was both physical and spiritual, for the records state that she was able to repel bullets with her body. She was also skilled in the mystical use of herbs, using the famed three legged "Kongo Pot" to boil herbs that confused the enemy, causing them to detour away from Maroon settlements. Such examples of *Igwọ Ọgwụ* (occult medicine) are part and parcel of the lives of female *Ndị Dibia* who are radically spiritual. At the end of the 19th century, colonizers described "*Obeah*" as running "like a black thread of mischief through the known history of the race",[62] acknowledging that "in former times [it was] as powerful an agent as slavery itself".[63] Nanny's power and fame confirms women's relation to the spirit and healing as understood through the lens of *Nne Agwụ*, and no less so because "women were the first *Dibịas* on earth. Men became *Dibịas* at the time of *Afadu Gwionu/Taa-lie-ose-naabo* [patriarchy]. Women were the first *Dibịas* on earth and that is why it is very easy to admit women to *Dibịahood*".[64] As the first *infamous* female *Ọbịa* known to the British, Grandy Nanny confirmed and secured woman's place in the technology of the Spirit and established female *Dibịahood* as a radical faith tradition.

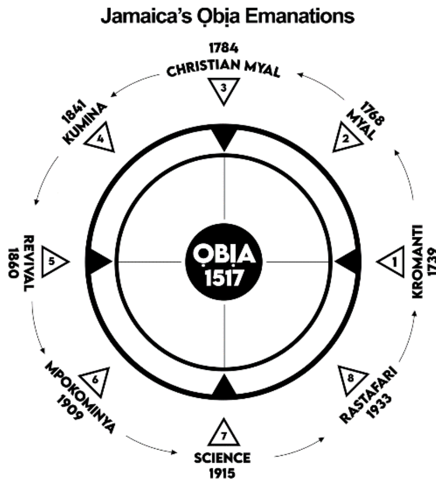
---

62 William Pringle Livingstone, *Black Jamaica: A Study in Evolution.* (London: S. Low, Marston and Co. 1899), 19.

63 Livingstone, *Black Jamaica*, 19-21.

64 Personal conversation.

Within the context of British terror, Africans converged around their mothers' tongue and appealed to the original goddess religion, *Ọbịa*, "with the most implicit Faith, upon all occasions". As Umeh says, one comes having been called to help. Enslaved African's call for help produced a movement and a mission. "Come to help us *Ọbịa*" in its holism was military intelligence, herbal skill, divination, mediation, magic, and neutral mystical power.[65] For over 100 years, until the advent of George Liele and Spirit Baptism, enslaved Africans' sole recourse for healing knowledge and wisdom was *Ọbịa*. The eight major emanations of *Ọbịa* in Jamaica[66] are radical faith traditions defined by spirit nomenclature. Kromanti, Myal, Christian Myal, Kumina, Revival, Mpokominya, Science, and Rastafari all represent *Nne Agwụ's* response to her children's cries for help. These innovative spiritualities bear the scars of wounds inflicted by starvation, overworking, whipping, rape, torture, and the habitual crucifixion of *Ndị Dibịa*. Emanations of *Ọbịa* are in fact "radicalities of Spirit" that testify to Nne *Agwụ's* ability to birth new forms of consciousness.



65 See, Dianne M. Stewart *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005b.

66 See Claudette A. Anderson, "Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari: A Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church." PhD diss., Emory University, 2010.

From continent to islands, from 1517 when the first enslaved Igbos arrived on the island, through the Calabar Maroons establishment of Kromanti to present day Rastafari, Afro-Jamaicans have put their faith in *Ndị Dibịa.* While Kromanti/Maroon *Ọbịa*, initially a powerful site of resistance, was later co-opted by the British, post-emancipation Jamaica gave birth to Revival *Ọbịa* and the Revival *balmyard* as a revolutionary site of healing and protection. In this syncretic form of worship, Afro-Jamaicans adopted the famous *Dibịa* of the New Testament, willing the "journeyman Jesus" to travel with them into the new reality of a free society. Freedom from physical chains necessitates different mothering skills that use the *Obe* (cross) of Jesus to mask *Nne Agwụ*, the Holy Spirit of *Ọbịa.*

Today, in the twenty-first century, Jamaicans continue to access the omnipresent power of *Nne Agwụ,* for, according to Modda V, "if a man have a money and trouble tek him; him a reach out to *Ọbịa*".[67] One way of reaching out to *Ọbịa* is by visiting the Revival *balmyard*, a place where the spirit is continually worked. When Nanny of the Maroons fought the British, *Ọbịa* was not yet outlawed and Christianity was unknown. Shared beliefs allowed for ease of practice and organic development within a hostile environment. Today, descendants of these first Afro-Jamaicans "reach out to *Ọbịa*" in secrecy out of fear of ridicule and imprisonment. Gradual changes in the conceptual environment occasioned by the adoption of "journeyman Jesus" have not prevented Jamaicans from accessing fundamental *Ọbịa.* It is their faith in "The Spirit" that propels them to more holistic solutions, solutions that value the African worldviews while negotiating patriarchy, imagined democracy, and gross capitalism. The practice of "Balm" necessitates an identification with the Spirit and this identification is a source of pride among Jamaican *Dibịas* and potential *Dibịas.*

For Modda V and other twenty-first century female *Dibịas,* the quest for "The Spirit", variously understood, constitutes a form of desperation. Modda V, in addressing the fundamentals of Revival Balm states, "everybody desperate for the Spirit…Ah telling dem dat it's better to walk Christ-like dan to have di Spirit. But everybody waan Spirit, having di Spirit give dem heights and fame".[68] The heights and fame achieved by access to "The Spirit" results from the Spirit's omniscience that offers an endless flow of experience and

[67] Mother P. Interview by Claudette A. Anderson. March 2007.
[68] Modda V, interview.

information. Having spiritual experience/s is highly valued as it almost always leads to important disclosures that positively impact the lives of individuals and their communities. In Revival *Ọbịa* parlance, spiritual experiences lead to "higher heights and deeper depths". Within Revival consciousness, faith is defined in terms of the Spirit, where faith and Spirit are one: "faith…is like di breeze- dats Spirit – nuh matter how yuh see di tree big and di branch dem big – di breeze move it. So yuh live by faith – di Spirit…".[69] This identification of faith with Spirit's power to move things, to change things, explains the desperation to "live by The Spirit". Spirit, for Revival *Ọbịa* and their patients, is not an abstraction. She is a radical, an activist, and her name is Faith.

Rejection of Christian faith by refusing the admonition to walk Christ-like evidences the urgent need for solutions. In noting that "spirituality and healing are associated with women in Jamaica",[70] Wedenoja maintains that, "Jamaicans say that 'Balm' and Revivalism have greater spiritual power including the power to heal, than other religions. The nominal churches are commonly said to be spiritless, lacking in healing power".[71] In the *Balmyards* I visited, and among female practitioners I interviewed, "spirit talk" dominated. My interview with Mother Jones in rural Jamaica left me feeling impoverished. She looked at me with such pity and spoke with an intense regret that I had not experienced "The Spirit", nor heard it speaking "expressly". Mother B, in eastern St. Andrew, alerted me to her middle/upper class clients as evidence that her clients spanned the social spectrum, exclaiming afterwards, "you would be surprised who believe in *Ọbịa*". The belief in *Ọbịa* guarantees a robust international clientele of both Jamaicans and non-Jamaicans who visit annually to get their "spiritual check-up". "*Balmyard* tourism" is one of Jamaica's open secrets and the *balmyard* tourist accesses all services of the local *Dibịa*, foremost among them, the spiritual bath and "cutting and clearing" rituals.

Within the feminine space of the *balmyard*, we find many of the practices indicated by *Dibịa* Umeh. Cultural continuities include the use of the crossroads, counteraction rituals, and seals/sigils (writings/drawings with *Nzu* or white chalk). The prolific use of water, herbs, and music/dancing is

69 *Ibid.*
70 Wedenoja, "Mothering", 89.
71 *Ibid.* 86.

evident everywhere and spirit-talk is ubiquitous. As in Igboland, the silk cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra)* is indispensable for certain types of *Dibịa* work and may feature in Initiations. *Balmyard* work is called "working The Spirit", and Modda V described her vocation as strict obedience to the Spirit: "I'm a slave to the voice that speaks to me".[72] The use of secret codes, hidden in gestures, proverbial language, and clothing, protects healers and healing knowledge from "those who should not know". Continued use of the astrological tetragram is seen in the observation of quarterly rituals/festivals, of which the annual Watt Town Spring gathering is the most celebrated. The call to *Dibịahood* is the same as in Igboland, either by lineage or by possession of *Nne Agwụ.* Refusal to obey one's calling results in either, or both, physical and mental illness. Whereas on the continent, the forest figures prominently in Initiations, in the island diasporas one generally becomes "slain in The Spirit" on the "mourning ground". It is here, laying the physical mother earth, that the Spirit teaches the adept. Knowledge is imparted through various means, including dreams, visions, visitations, and voices. These downloads of information are central to self-knowledge and future practice. In these initiations, the space of the mourning ground is considered a school; referenced in biblical terms as "Bethlehem School Room" and/or "Jerusalem School Room"., Spiritual education may also take place "inside" *Ceiba pentandra,* as mentioned above. There is a common-sense approach to the Christian Bible that figures prominently in Revival Balm. It is not the only "holy book" used and, moreover, women's intuition, spirit messages, and orders are privileged above written words.

The Revival Modda is mother to the entire community and, while cleansing rituals dominate the landscape, the androgyne Modda is also a tower of psychological and emotional support. A supreme empath, the Spirit allows her to feel the patient's pain and she holds healing services to allow the Spirit to work in a communal space. Thanksgiving "tables" are celebrations of success created by the Spirit that allow for people to dance and journey in the Spirit. The atmosphere of the *balmyard* is generally one of peace and tranquility where many people report being healed by just being present in the spiritual ambience. The physical, emotional, and psychological wounds inflicted by violent enslavement and ruthless capitalism has left both visible and invisible scars. Stated in simple terms, "people are suffering" and, according to Modda V, her "working the Spirit" to alleviate this suffering is

[72] Modda V, interview.

indifferent to mundane legalities. "You have to help people!" says Modda V and the indignities suffered while providing medicine are wounds that leave sacred scars on the mind and body of *Ndi Dibịa.*

If criminalization is our deepest wound, then it continues to leave the biggest scars. Perhaps the most radical aspect of Revival Obia practice is the assistance given to persons who run afoul of the law. The appeal to *Omenala/Odinani* or natural/God's law, takes precedence over mundane laws. In explaining why she helped with court cases, Modda V cited the history of the island and the injustice system that, for her, constitutes a litany of confusion. Modda V has a spiritual sanction against working for those who commit murder, irrespective of the reason. She adheres strictly to this injunction even though her empathetic nature makes her partial to young people, who are prone to go astray. "I'm not supposed to work on court case, but when the people come, I feel sorry for them",[73] says Modda V, pointing to an altar with Tarot cards. Her "Tarot Tower" of court cases is proof that *Ndi Dibịa* can sometimes "beg di Spirit a favor". Prohibitive demonization is a wound *Ọbịa* continues to nurse with both hands and without ritual protection for family and progeny. Within this sacred tradition, scarred by criminalization, the manifold powers of *Nne Agwụ* wrestle with those who would enforce common laws.

Revival Balm is a complex system of workers of varying "powers" that are accessed as needed. Patients are referred to different "specialists", many of whom have expertise in court cases. Difficult court cases are usually handled by Science *Ọbịa,*[74] and these practitioners, usually men, are experts in *ọkụkụ ọgwụ.* These men, who are said to work with "both hands", are revered and feared. It is their vocation that has led to a perceived gender division in *Ọbịa* practice. In short, it is said that "men kill and women heal". Although Modda V practices positive medicine, she sometimes refers patients to practitioners of *ọkụkụ ọgwụ.* She, however, laments what she terms the "spoiling" of Revivalists who leave to practice Science. The ability of Science *Ọbịa* to send psychic missiles, perform psychic surgery, and provide a variety of "guards" against various evils ensures them clientele from the armed services. Members of the judiciary, being in the line of fire of

[73] Modda V, interview.
[74] Also called 'deLawrence' from William Lauron de Laurence, author of *The Great Book of Magical Art.* His books are said to be used extensively.

psychic missiles, also frequent *Ndi Dibịa.* The irony of law enforcement and members of the judiciary (judges, police personnel, lawyers in particular) accessing the powers of *Ọbịa*,[75] an outlawed practice, speaks not only to the continued relevance of *Ọbịa*, but also to the tenacity of Afro-centric worldviews. It is a testament to the success of *Nne Agwụ's Ọbịa* Mission.

In *The Promised Key*, the founder of Rastafari *Ọbịa,* Leonard Howell, writes in praise of the *balmyard*: "a Balm Yard is not a Hospital neither is it a obeah shop".[76] His critique of the commodification and desacralization of *Ọbịa*, originally a Mission and had by the early 20th century become known as spiritual malevolence, is scathing. For Howell, it was not just that *Ọbịa* was identified with gross negativity, but, rather, that the society produced and reproduced this evil. Jamaica was a factory, a manufacturer of evil. He declared war on the "black and white heart Obeah Factory" in which fallen Angels wreak havoc with their "deadly poisonous indomitable lying tongue[s]".[77] Inspired by his revolutionary forbears, Howell made Rastafari *Ọbịa* the greatest anti-colonial movement in Jamaica and, in so doing, declared war on epistemicide. In affirming the practice of Balm and the feminine space of the *balmyard,* Howell acknowledged and resisted the desacralization of our ancestral lineage, that is *Nne Agwụ.* Notwithstanding the double-edged sword of historical records producing a litany of confusion, Howell, in founding the last emanation of *Ọbịa*, and formulating a new language, "dreadtalk", fostered the Spirit to respell "Obeah". The spell ỌBỊA is a positive site/sight of resistance and *Ọbịa'*s eight Emanations are the works of the Spirit: sacred, scarred, and radical.

Respelling "Obeah": Against epistemicide by law and literacy

> Epistemicide is the deliberate act, behavior, exercise or crime…calculated, concerted, and systematic destruction…of an

[75] See Claudette A. Anderson. "Judge, Jury or Obeahman? Power Dynamics in the Jamaican House O' Law." Presented at conference *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, Newcastle University, July 2008.

[76] Leonard Howell. *The Promised Key. Introduced and Edited by E. S. P. McPherson.* (Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers Group. 2001), 11.

[77] Howell, *The Promised Key,* 13.

> ethnic, racial, religious, or national group identity…through the negations of their indigenous knowledge systems…[78]

Western educated scholars have spent centuries working to define *Ọbịa*. Notwithstanding the latest attempts to explain away the worldview(s) that doomed millions of Africans,[79] the fact of the matter is that the Act of 1760/1761 is an act of epistemicide. The formal literization and definition of *Ọbịa* in Western terms that occurred with this law constituted a singular attempt to erase the intellectual tradition of West-Central Africa. Moreover, it sought to deprive enslaved Africans of lineage, language, and culture. With this criminalization of African thought and practice, despite the later syncretism of African spiritualities with Christianity, there is still measurable fear, hatred, and non-acceptance of African-centered beliefs and practices that are viewed as ugly and backward. This self-loathing, which masquerades in Academia, in Christianity and other favored spaces as intelligence and forward thinking, is a form of profound ignorance. This sad state of affairs is the very essence of epistemicide whose "lasting effects transmutes into internalized replicable self-destruction of the intellectual heritage of the society…the destruction becoming self-sponsoring, self-propelling and self-promoting".[80] The epistemicide committed against Africans is an iniquity almost impossible to combat, but the fundamentality of *Ọbịa* is self-protecting. It creates in *Ndị Dibịa,* and potential *Ndị Dibịa,* a desperation for the Spirit that, for them, is the very definition of knowledge. In this sense, respelling Obeah is an act of re-education, remembering, and re-knowing.

This Igbo-centric *Ọbịa* is important for distilling (from the cacophonic negation) a single intellectual tradition that is accessible. While elsewhere in the non-anglophone Caribbean, discrete retentions of pre-Christian African traditions are available, this is not the case for descendants of those enslaved by the British, of whom it was said, "No Country exceeds them in a barbarous Treatment of Slaves, or in the cruel Methods by which they put

[78] Bewaji, John Ayotunde Tunde Isola. "Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora." Presented as An Inaugural Professorial Lecture. (University of the West Indies, Mona Kingston, February 19, 2015), 14.

[79] See Kelly Wisecup, "Knowing Obeah." *Atlantic Studies* 10, no.3 (2013): 1–20.

[80] Bewaji, "Liberation Humanities," 14.

them to death”.[81] This severe cruelty was supported by “clergymen themselves [who] were often among the most immoral in the island”.[82] During slavery, “the established Anglican church in Jamaica represents, perhaps, the most disgraceful episode in the history of that institution”.[83] The slavocracy, in their own words, admitted that the inhumane conditions of enslavement produced a “multitude of occasions which…provoke[d] the Negroes to exercise the powers of Obi against each other”.[84] Against this chronicling and ownership of the corruption of the African and African spirituality, it was further observed that enslaved Africans “have a kind of occasional Conformity, and *join without Distinction* in their solemn Sacrifices and Gambols”[85] (emphasis mine). Universal adoption of the term *Ọbịa* in this strange hostile environment[86] confirms a singular belief in the fundamentality of spiritual power expressed in regional and dialectical variations. For example, we recognize in the word *Ọbịa* the linguistic convergence of Akan cognates: *krabea* (intellectual gift), *Obi (*somebody/person), and *hybea* (destiny); Bakongo *Nzambi* (God), *jumbi* (ancestral spirits), *mbiya* (charm/medicine). The different spellings of *Ọbịa* record the slavocracy’s attempts to capture the polyphony of West-Central African cognates denoting concepts associated with expertise, knowledge, medicine, and spirit. The different pronunciations are indicative of the intonations of different ethnic groups and their creolized descendants.

---

81 Charles Leslie. *A New History of Jamaica: From the Earliest Accounts, to the Taking of Porto Bello by Vice-Admiral Vernon. (*London: Printed for J. Hodges), 39.

82 Orlando Patterson. *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica. (*Rutherford [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), 47. See also Leslie (1740:43) who upon visiting Jamaica was moved to report that “the Clergy here are of a character so vile, that I do not care to mention it; for except a few, they are the most finished of our Debauchees”.

83 Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 47.

84 Bryan Edwards. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. (London: printed for Crosby and Letterman; for Mundell and Son, Edinburgh; and J. Mundell, Glasgow, 1799), 169.

85 Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica,* 306–307.

86 The term also occurs in non-British colonies. For example, in Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), “Each village has its own obia osu (obia houses) – shrines devoted to different classes of gods and spirits”. See Bilby (1993:18). In Igbo *Obi a* means “this house” and “*Òsu* means people dedicated as slaves to service of a deity, or whose ancestors were so dedicated”. As such, “the son of an òsu is an òsu. Moreover anyone who is proved to have had contact with an òsu also becomes an òsu”. See Williamson, 264. This caste system has however been abrogated by law in Nigeria.

While demonization by British enslavers led researchers on a quest for West-Central African words confirming negative aspects of medico-spiritual practice, the *Dibịa* custodian, with his “potent mouth”, has allowed for an understanding of the Igbo tones, *Ọbịa* and *Dibịa,* as fundamental self-reflexive polymorphs that demonstrate the human *will to be* within the context of dehumanizing Christian terror. The fundamentality of “*bịa*” as meaning both “to come” and “knowledge and wisdom” is related to its demonstrative forms: “*Obi a*” denoting “this mind”, “this will’, “this heart”, “this house”, and “this boy”. Furthermore, while *Di bịa* is expert/husband of knowledge and wisdom and master of the land, intoned differently as *Dị/bịa,* the literal meaning is be/come. The tonality of post-literate languages is evidence of their primordial and fundamental nature. This primordiality fosters the continental African belief and practice of living as welcome guests on planet earth.

Notwithstanding West-Central cognates,[87] Umeh’s ouevre clues us to, what he terms, “the March of Igbo Civilization” and the intimate linguistic relationship between language of enslaver and enslaved and the commonality of the “bi” morph within English itself. While there is no English equivalence in terms of a *Dibịa* profession, there is in terms of *Dibịa*, of be-ingness, of common humanity. It should be obvious to those who are listening, that the sound/tone “bi” (be) has the same meanings in English. Our common humanity is the occult equivalence of *Ọbịa* in English. We are beings, coming and going to and from earth and travelers upon the earth. Everyday Igbo-English words related to beingness, life, and knowledge include the bibliography that is a vital part of academic papers. The biography that describes one’s life, the obituary we craft when a life ends, and the biology we call a life-science. Terms such binary, bible, obelisk, bytes are also English cognates of *Dibịa/Ọbịa.* I make a point about the English cognates of *Dibịa/Ọbịa* because Western education[88] systems trace the etymology of English words to Latin/Greek and elide the Egyptian African sources. In *Introducing Africana philosophy,* Henry encourages us to engage in a radical linguistic archaeology. When this is done, Africana again, finds itself as source and model.

[87] Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*. (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2003), 352.

[88] See Bewaji “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” and “Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora.”

Obia, by Igbo splling, puts “di I” in Obeah.[89] Respelling “Obeah” begins with replacing the “e” with “di I”/the self as all selves.[90] Putting “di I” in *Obia* confirms our ancestral heritage, our own human experience as knowing beings. The “I” as an esoteric symbol of beingness and manifestation, represents the human journey of becoming *Ọbịa.* As a representation of the merger of journey and knowledge, *Ọbịa* is an ideographic celebration of post-literacy with diacritics symbolizing the sacred scars on mind and body. The Spell *Ọbịa* is an ideograph of the affirmative Spirit, of the positive sound and sight. *Ọbịa* promises a return to *Omenala* and the AFA Education System, the first “dot-come”, an organic binary system of biologic intelligence. The Spell *Ọbịa* bears battle scars of triumph over epistemicide and signals a new time of knowledge reparations. This unearthing of the Igbo mother tongue as source and vehicle for the expression and experience of African spirituality in the Anglophone Caribbean is the spirit “speaking expressly” of a *Dibịa* diaspora. It is a *Dibịa* diaspora shaped equally by Black women’s potent voices expressing the primordial intellect. The sound/s of “*Ọbịa*” is the African orality defying European literacy. It is the sound/s of Black women’s bodies and Black women’s lives as sacred texts against epistemicide.

Conclusion:

The British slave trade in Black bodies rendered matriarchy, and any insistence on Black humanity and equality, radical. *Ọbịa*’s enduring existence and revolutionary ethos negates the falsehood of patriarchal White supremacy, challenges the lies about Africa and Africana spirituality, and critiques the continued criminalization of indigenous knowledge systems in the Anglophone Caribbean. The benefits of an African sacred science for Africana Christianity, in general, and Africana women of faith, in particular, may be seen in the organic radicality of a matriarchal space where the supreme being, *Chukwu Abịàmà ,* defined by knowledge, is both female and male*,* and where the Holy Spirit*, Nne Agwụ*, is female. Re-engagement with

[89] [Obeah] *Obia* by Igbo spelling represented phonetically is [oo-bee-yah]: The first two syllables are long with the last syllable “ah” being short. In the case of *Obia* respelt *Ọbịa* [oh-bi-a], all the syllables are short.

[90] Rasta talk and the basic tenet of all traditional knowledge systems. See Pollard *Dread Talk.* Rastafari’s concept of “I and I” is similar to Akan “because you are, I am” and Mayan “I am another yourself”.

and affirmation of these, our own traditions, where women are equally free to occupy positions of power and to be positively androgynous, is important for women of color who are serious about spiritual empowerment and service. The value of traditional Igbo spirituality lies in its call for a return to the first becoming. It is a coming to terms with *Ndị Ọbịa* radicality, a radical female tradition that appeals to the cosmic laws not Eurocentric ones, and where women's knowledge and intuition replaces biblical affirmations.

Umeh's four-fold performance of Offering; Testimony, Communion, and Redemption insists on the redundancy of the terms "Obeah man" and "Obeah woman". *Ọbịa* is a woman, man, and spirit. *Ọbịa* is a person, and a power, and a person with healing power. *Ọbịa* as *Dibịa* is a travelling healer who journeys in and by the Spirit. When our children ask, "what is *Ọbịa*?", we can now answer with confidence that it is the intellectual tradition of our continental forebears, our very own system of knowledge. When our children ask, "what is *Ọbịa*?", we can teach them that before enslavement and epistemicide the correct question would be, "who is *Ọbịa*?". We can affirm for them that *Ọbịa* is a chosen one who, with knowledge of both positive and negative medicine, practices one or the other. While our ancestors' use of *Agha Ọgwụ* against the slavocracy was, for us, a positive good, the slavocracy's prohibition was our biggest wound. In the 21st century, our continued criminalization *Ọbịa,* our African ancestral heritage, is our biggest scar.

In conclusion, the two volumes of *After God is Dibịa* achieves their stated purpose in showing us that "what *Dibịa* is, has, knows, does…[constitutes] fundamental and far-reaching contributions of the black man to ancient and modern world civilizations". *Dibịa* Umeh, in his mediation of a matrifocal healing tradition, provides a firm anchor for *Dibịa*s and potential *Dibịas*. *Ọbịa* practitioners in the diaspora now have a place from which to affirm themselves, their tradition, and their future. By building "bridges of belonging" that allow for both local/national and inter-African Reparations, Umeh's *Ọbịa*-working is constitutive of the African Knowledge Program advocated by the Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC). More than "religious engagement", it is a potent form of "psychological rehabilitation",[91] a beneficent psychotronic missile against epistemicide. Even within the

[91] Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC), 10 Point Action Plan. https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/

context of the spiritual terror that characterized the race to steal and possess *ala* (land), *onye Ọbịa* was a participant and observer, insisting on the endlessness of being, defying, and being defiant, constituting a radical woman's faith tradition, calling again for revolution, casting a re-spell, and reminding us that we are always be-coming…God. *Onye Ọbịa* is calling on us to embrace our divinity and *be* proud Africans. *Onye Ọbịa*'s radical example is calling on us to decriminalize Obeah and "tell the children the truth".[92]

Obịa
The Healer[93]

To revolt is to take your healing in your hands.
To heal is to embrace divinity:
To see God and
Become what you have seen.

Obịa Om
Obịa Ọm
Obịa Om

[92] Bob Marley and the Wailers. "Babylon System." Survival. Tuff Gong. 1977.

[93] Gerald Eze, "*Ọbịa*: The Healer." An Ode to Jamaican *Ndi Dibịa* by *Ọkwa Ọja* (the flute master). There is an intimate relationship between the flute master and *Dibịa*. Umeh defines *Ọkwa Ọja* as a mystic who "helps mystics and *Dibịas*". See Vol. 1:72. For Eze, the extra-musical *Ọja* "is the connection between the world of the Igbo ancestors and the world of the living…the rallying point between the new Igbo and the authentic Igbo spirit".

References

Acts of Assembly. Act 24 of 1760, Clause x. *Acts of Assembly* Vol. p.55. I Geo. III, c. 22. "An Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves, Jamaica 1760." 1769. *Obeah Histories.* Accessed July 7, 2023. http://obeahhistories.org/1760-jamaica-law/

Anderson, Claudette A. "Judge, Jury or Obeahman? Power Dynamics in the Jamaican House O' Law." Paper presented at conference *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, Newcastle University, July 2008.

Anderson, Claudette A. "Gnostic Obia from Chukwu Abiama to Jah Rastafari: A Theology of the JamAfrican Obia Catholic Church." PhD diss., Emory University, 2010.

Anderson, Claudette A. "Freedom to Catch the Spirit: Conceptualizing Black Church Studies in a Caribbean Context." In *The Black Church Studies Reader,* edited by Alton Pollard and Carol B. Duncan, 217–235. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137534552

Barima, Kofi. "Cutting Across Space and Time: Obeah's Service to Jamaica's Freedom Struggle in Slavery and Emancipation." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies.* 9, no.4 (2016): 16–31.

Bewaji, John Ayotunde Tunde Isola. "Liberation Humanities for Africa and the Diaspora." Presented as An Inaugural Professorial Lecture. University of the West Indies, Mona Kingston, February 19, 2015.

Bewaji, John Ayotunde Isola, "Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Education and Africa: The Challenge of Epistemicide and Excentric Educational System and Practice. *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 65–82.

Bilby, Kenneth. "The Strange Career of 'Obeah': Defining Magical Power in the West Indies." Paper presented at a general seminar at the Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Powerand History, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, November 9, 1993.

Bilby, Kenneth. *True-Born Maroons.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 2005.

Bilby, Kenneth.An (Un)Natural Mystic in the Air: Images of Obeah in Caribbean Song. Paper presented at conference *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, Newcastle University, July 2008.

Bilby, Kenneth M. and Jerome S. Handler. "Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life. *The Journal of Caribbean History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 153–183.

Boaz, Danielle. "Obeah, Vagrancy, and the Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Analyzing the Proscription of 'Pretending to Possess Supernatural Powers' in the Anglophone Caribbean," *Journal of Law and Religion* 32, no. 3 (2017): 423–448. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-law-and religion/issue/E9B9B4A389B5EDADE2FAB152710C398E

Brown, Vincent. Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society. *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 24, no. 43 (2003): 24–53.

Brown, Vincent. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Harvard University Press. 2020.

Burham, Michelle. "Obeah's unproductive bodies: a response to 'Obeah: knowledge, power and writing in the early Atlantic world.'" *Atlantic Studies.* 12, no. 2 (2015): 235–243.Caribbean Reparations Commission. 10 Point Plan. https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/ August 2, 2023

Cassecanarie, Myal Djumboh. *Obeah Simplified, The True Wanga! What It Really Is, And How It Is Done!* Port-of-Spain, [Trinidad, B.W.I.]:"Mirror" Off., and London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trűbner & Co., Ltd., 1895.

Chambers, Douglas B. "My own Nation: Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora." *Slavery and Abolition* 18, no. 1 (1997): 72–97.

Chambers, Douglas B. *Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Crowthers, S.A. *Vocabulary of the Igbo Language.* Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. London, Charring Cross, 1882.

Crowthers, S.A. *Vocabulary of the Igbo Languag*e. Part II. English-Igbo. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. London, Charring Cross, 1883.

de Laurence, William Lauron. *The Great Book of Magical Art, Hindu Magic and East Indian Occultism, and The Book of Secret Hindu, Ceremonial, and Talismanic Magic.* Chicago, Ill: De Laurence Co., 1939.

Echeruo, Michael J.C. *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language with an English-Igbo Index*. Longman Nigeria Plc: Lagos State, Nigeria. 2001.

Edwards, Bryan. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. London: printed for Crosby and Letterman 1799.

Eze, Gerald. "Ojafuturism." Unpublished paper. *Ichoku Academy,* Akwa, Anambra State. Nigeria. 2023.

Eze, Gerald. "Ọbịa: The Healer." Igbo Rising. Gerald Eze Oja Performance. forthcoming 2024.

Gerbner, Katharine. ""They call me Obea": German Moravian missionaries and Afro-Caribbean Religion in Jamaica, 1754–1760," *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* 12, no.2 (2015): 160–178.

Handler, J. S. and K. M. Bilby. "On the Early Use and Origin of the Term 'Obeah' in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean." *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 22, no.2 (2001): 87–100.

Handler, Jerome. "Anti-Obeah Laws of the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760s to 2010. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities Charlottesville,

Virginia] 35th Annual Conference, Society for Caribbean Studies, International Slavery Museum, Liverpool 29 June-1 July, 2011

Henry, Paget. *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro Caribbean Philosophy.* New York: Routledge. 2000.

Howell, Leonard (Maragh G.G.). *The Promised Key. Introduced and Edited by E. S. P. McPherson.* Brooklyn, New York: A&B Publishers Group, 2001.

Iroegbu, Patrick "Igbo Medicine and Culture: The Concept of Dibia and Dibia Representation in Igbo Society of Nigeria,".http://chatafrik.com/articles/health-and-welfare/igbo-medicine-and-culture-the-concept-of-dibia-and-dibia-representation-in-igbo-society-of-nigeria. Accessed January 18, 2018

Johnston, Harry. *The Negro in the New World.* London: Methuen & Co., 1910

Kaunda, Mutale. "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions." *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* Vol. 27 No 1 (July 2021): 91–117.

Leslie, Charles. *A New History of Jamaica: From the Earliest Accounts, to the Taking of Porto Bello by Vice-Admiral Vernon.* London: Printed for J. Hodges, 1740.

Lewis, Matthew Gregory. *Journal of a West India Proprietor: kept during a residence in the island of Jamaica.* London: John Murray, 1834.

Livingstone, William Pringle. *Black Jamaica: A Study in Evolution.* London: S. Low, Marston and Co., 1899.

Marley, Bob and the Wailers. "Babylon System." Survival. Tuff Gong. 1977.

Northcote, Thomas. W. *Anthropological Report of the Igbo Speaking Peoples of Nigeria. Part V. Addenda to Igbo-English Dictionary.* Harrison and Sons: London, 1914.

Nwafor, Nze Chukwukadibia E. “The Old Woman of Immense Wisdom: On the Mystical Science Behind the Afa Akpụkpala Oracular System.” 2013. https://igbocybershrine.com/tag/ifa-divination/ Retrieved March 11, 2016

Nwafor, Nze Chukwukadibia E. *Leopards of the Magical Dawn: Science and the Cosmological Foundations of Igbo Culture*. Morrisville, NC, USA: Lulu Press Inc, 2014.

Paton, Diana. “Obeah Acts: Producing and Policing the Boundaries of Religion in the Caribbean.” *Small Axe* 28 March (2009): 1–18.

Patterson, Orlando. *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica.* Rutherford [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969.

Pollard, V., and L. Goodison. *Dread talk: The Language of Rastafari.* McGill: Queen’s University Press, 2000.

Stewart, Dianne M. “African-Derived Religions in Jamaica: Polyvalent Repertoires of Culture and Identity in the Black Atlantic.” *Contours* 3 (2005): 75–112.

Stewart, Dianne M. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005b.

Stravinskas, Peter MJ. *Catholic Encyclopedia.* Our Sunday Visitor. Huntington, Indiana. 1991.

Tuelon, Alan. “Nanny-Maroon Chieftainess.” *Caribbean Quarterly.* 19, no.4 (1973): 20–27.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria.* Vol. 1. London: Karnak House, 1997.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination and Sacred Science in Nigeria.* Vol. 2. London: Karnak House, 1999a.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *The Igbo People: Their Origin and Culture Area*. Enugu, Nigeria: Gostak Print. & Pub. Co. 1999b.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *The March of Igbo Civilization Vol 1.* Lambert Academic Publishing. Beau Bassin, Mauritius, 2017.

Umeh, John Anenechukwu. *The March of Igbo Civilization Vol 2*. Lambert Academic Publishing. Beau Bassin, Mauritius, 2017b.

Usuanlele, Uyilawa. "Tracing the African Origins of Obeah (Obia): Some Conjectures and Inferences from the History of Benin Kingdom." *West Bohemian Historical Review* I, no.2 (2016): 165–184.

Warner-Lewis, Maureen. *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2003.

Weaver, Karol K. *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth–Century Saint Dominigue.* University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2006.

Wedenoja, William and Claudette A. Anderson. "Revival: An indigenous Religion and Spiritual Healing Practice in Jamaica," in *Caribbean Healing Traditions: Implications for Health and Mental Health*, edited by Patsy Sutherland, Roy Moodley and Barry Chevannes, 128–139. New York and London: Routledge, 2014.

Wedenoja, William. "Mothering and the Practice of 'Balm' in Jamaica," in *Women as Healers: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Carol Shepherd McClain, 76–97. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

Wedenoja, "W. Religion and Adaptation in Rural Jamaica." Thesis Ph. D. Dissertation: University of California, San Diego. Department of Anthropology, 1978.

Williamson, Kay. *Dictionary of Ònìchà Igbo*. 2nd Ed. Ethiope Press, 2006. https://www.rogerblench.info/Language/Niger Congo/VN/Igboid/Igbo%20Dictionary.pdf

Wisecup, Kelly. “Knowing Obeah.” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no.3 (2013): 1–20.

Wisecup, Kelly and Toni Wall Jaudon. “On Knowing and not knowing about Obeah.” *Atlantic Studies*. 12, no. 2 (2013): 129–143.

Empowered Resistance: The Impact of an African Indigenous Faith Tradition on the "Woman Who Was More Than a Man"

Shandon C. Klein[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Shandon Klein is a doctoral student at Southern Methodist University studying Religious Ethics in the Graduate Program for Religious Studies. Her research involves studying an ethic of control and an ethic of resistance to discern the role of religion in cultivating these ethics for better or worse.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Southern Methodist University, USA
scklein@mail.smu.edu

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7833-3472

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/5y8c5z25

ABSTRACT

Theology plays a role in how we think about human agency for social change. One's conception of God's relationship to humanity, or lack thereof, can suppress or empower resistance to oppressive systems. The prophetic revolutionary fighter Aline Sitoë Diatta[1] remains an inspirational symbol of resistance, not only for the Diola people of Senegal but also more broadly throughout West Africa.[2] As "La femme qui était plus qu'un homme"—the woman who was more than a man—her legendary impact on subsequent generations offers the opportunity to investigate the empowering influence of the Diola[3] indigenous faith tradition, *awasena path*, on moral and ethical formation. Employing the womanist theological ethics of Katie G. Cannon and Delores Williams, along with the quare theory of E. Patrick Johnson, this paper theorizes an *ethic of resistance* and an *ethic of control*. The paper will then explore Diatta's use of both ethics based on an analysis of an African short film, *À La Recherche Aline*. Diatta's embodiment of an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control within modern reenactments of her story depict her rebellion against colonialism as empowered by the *awasena* path and its theology. The film reflects a modern reception history of Diatta that continues to inspire those of African descent to defend against attacks on their personhood by white supremacy.

KEYWORDS
ethic of resistance, ethic of control, womanist theological ethics, quare theory, Aline Sitoë Diatta, lived theology

1 Also known as Alinesitoué Diatta.

2 Tijan M. Sallah, "Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia: A Question in Search of a Literature," in *Routledge Handbook of Minority Discourses in African Literature*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), 96, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429354229-9; Robert M. Baum, *West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2015), 145–46.

3 Also known as Jola or Ajamat.

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

Diola Awasena Path as Lived Religion and its Oral History of Women's Prophetic Empowerment

In *West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition*, Baum makes a significant contribution to Africana religion by conducting detailed ethnographic research and oral history, uncovering the importance of women within the Diola faith tradition, *awasena path*. The book is about a small community in West Africa and follows a woman prophet, Alinesitoué Diatta, also known as Aline Sitoë Diatta, who is empowered by a persisting prophetic tradition. As Dianna Bell points out, the book vividly demonstrates how colonialism impacted a particular West African community and how religion worked as an agent of social change. Moreover, it expands on gendered discourses within the study of Africana religious leadership.[4] Given the book's focus on how the Diola navigated multiple cultures, it is similarly applicable to studying how the African diaspora was impacted by the Transatlantic Slave Trade. *West Africa's Women of God* examines how African indigenous faith traditions, especially the *awasena path*, protected communal identities from the external ideologies of Christian proselytization and surrounding Islamic influence during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Baum notes that within the study of traditional African religions, most Western scholars view the term "religion" as "an institutionally and conceptually distinct category of analysis," regardless of the absence of an equivalent term or concept in African language.[5] In building relationships within the township of Kadjinol in Ziguinchor, Senegal, Baum discerns that for this Diola community, religion provided a more dynamic perspective on life rather than a stagnant one.[6] Four words within the Diola's various dialects—*makanye, boutine, kainoe*, and *huasene*—reveal the danger of any religious study that solely relies on analyzing colonialist texts.[7] The word *Makanye,* translates to "what we do," and represents what the Diola

---

4 Dianna Bell, "Introduction to Roundtable Commentary for West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition," *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 1 (2018): 125.

5 Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 29.

6 Ibid, 29.

7 Ibid, 29.

understand as their customs or traditions.[8] *Boutine,* or "path," identifies particular religious traditions within ethnic groups.[9] For example, the Diola community in Kadjinol refer to Christianity as a "European path" and Islam as a "Mandinka path".[10] *Kainoe,* or "thought", refers to ideas about humanity, nature, animals, and their collective relationship with a supreme being and other spirits.[11] Finally, *huasene* refers to rituals that tangibly combine the *awasena* path tradition and Diola *kainoe* into a communal experience.[12] Baum understands religion within the framework of *makanye, boutine, kainoe*, and *huasene*.

In contrast to constrictive definitions of religion, Baum's scholarship focuses on studying *lived* religion, acknowledging indigenous believers' and practitioners' lives and practices as primary sources.[13] Similarly, I consider the term "theology" within the frame of the *kainoe*. Theology, in the context of this paper, represents the ideologies of supreme beings and spirits, and their relationship with humanity, nature, animals, and creation. When differentiating between lived religion and lived theology, Charles Marsh finds that while both methods examine practices, beliefs, and objects of religion, the goals of such examination diverge. On the one hand, the field of lived religion analyzes religious practices, beliefs, and objects to discern and "understand more clearly the human phenomenon of religion" in historical and social contexts.[14] Lived theology, on the other hand, examines these aspects to understand religious believers' epistemology of supreme beings or spirits in their daily lives.[15]

The dissonance between defining religion has led to a lingering debate on the importance of African supreme beings within African traditional

8 Ibid, 29.
9 Ibid, 29.
10 Ibid, 29–30.
11 Ibid, 30.
12 Ibid, 30.
13 Ibid, 29.
14 Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds., *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.
15 Marsh, Slade, and Azaransky, 7.

religions.[16] Were they an original concept within such traditions, or did these supreme beings arise from exterior religious influence, like Christianity or Islam? Due to the limited contact between Europeans and Diola, Baum challenges the latter by highlighting the presence of the Diola supreme being, known as Ata-Emit or Emitai, before the 17th century.[17]

Emitai and Ethics

Diola elders describe Emitai as the all-knowing creator of the world and the source of knowledge for Diola survival in the southern Casamance.[18] This supreme being provided rain and practical knowledge of rice cultivation that was vital for both the local economy and sustenance during times of drought.[19] Emitai was also a judicial presence that established the Diola ethical system, helping the community to discern between mere rudeness and heinous acts, *gnigne*.[20] Followers of the *awasena* path believed they were accountable to Emitai.[21] According to the Diola community, Emitai allowed people to see and communicate with spirits, permitting souls to travel during the night.[22] Emitai also chose a select few to be messengers, *Emitai dabognol* or "whom Emitai had sent."[23] These messengers communicated practical strategies and wisdom to the Diola people on behalf of Emitai during times of uncertainty.[24] Baum has in mind *Emitai dabognol* when defining the term "prophet" within his work.[25]

During the colonial era, Diola prophets were similar to the prophets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in two ways. First, *Emitai dabognols* would claim that their God, Emitai, spoke with them directly. Second, Emitai commanded them to share God's guidance with the Diola people and their

16 Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 30.
17 Ibid, 32.
18 Ibid, 33.
19 Ibid, 33.
20 Ibid, 33.
21 Ibid, 33.
22 Ibid, 33.
23 Ibid, 5.
24 Ibid, 5.
25 Ibid, 11.

neighboring communities.[26] Emitai's role in protecting against drought explains the importance of this supreme being and the role of women within the tradition. For example, although women could not become priestesses in the *awasena* path tradition, they could participate in *Nyakul Emit*, the funeral dance for Emitai, during a drought.[27] This dance obligated Diola men of the community to perform rituals at *all* Diola spirit shrines, including shrines of circumcised males and the priest-king, when the regular rituals had failed to produce rain.[28] As such, Emitai permitted women to advocate for the Diola community. Eventually, excessive drought conditions and the colonial pressures of war and economic exploitation weakened the perceived effectiveness of contemporary male prophets.[29] These converging forces left space for female prophets to step in to aid in the healing of their land and community.[30]

The *awasena* path's oral history of prophetic tradition and its empowerment of African women offers an excellent example of religious dynamism in the face of uncertainty sparked by the realities of colonialism.[31] The implications of the religion's ethical and moral formation for resistance amid oppression are worth further exploration, especially in the African diasporic fight against white supremacy. In the following sections, I will discuss two theories, one of an ethic of resistance and of an ethic of control. Finally, highlighting the influence of *awasena* theology on Diatta's moral and ethical actions, I exegete reenactments of Diatta's story from the African short film, *À la recherche Aline.*

Theorizing an Ethic of Resistance and an Ethic of Control

A Clarification of Terms and Positionality

As a theoretical foundation, I will discuss how I use the terms "ethics", "moral agent", "morality", "ethic", and "virtue". For this paper, the term "ethics" refers to moral principles—standards of right, wrong, good, and evil that an

[26] Ibid, 5.

[27] Ibid, 62.

[28] Ibid, 62.

[29] Ibid, 60.

[30] Bell, "Introduction to Roundtable Commentary for West Africa's Women of God," 124; Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 60.

[31] See specifically Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, chaps. 4 & 5.

individual possesses—that govern an individual's behavior and activity in a society. A "moral agent" refers to any individual who makes decisions regarding right, wrong, good, or evil. The "morality" from which these moral principles arise is a system of normative rules that an individual believes they should follow to live a good and meaningful life. In the academic field of Ethics,[32] two types of morality are often debated: the universal and the conventional. Universal morality assumes that a set of principles are true for all people, regardless of their culture or society, i.e. natural law theory.[33] Conventional morality refers to a set of norms and values within a particular group of people or society.[34] Ethicist John Deigh explains the complexity of conventional morality:

> As is all too common, sometimes these beliefs rest on superstitions and prejudices, and sometimes the corresponding customs and practices promote cruelty and inflict indignity. It can happen then that a person comes to recognize such facts about some of the norms belonging to his society's conventional morality and, though observance of these norms has become second nature in him, to conclude nonetheless that he ought to reject them. Implicit in this conclusion is a realization that one has to look beyond the conventional morality of one's society to determine what ends to pursue in life and what it is right to do in the conduct of life.[35]

Within the frame of conventional morality, one's social location and self-defined community matter in determining what is right, wrong, good, or evil for an individual. Diversity within one's self-defined community can help one's sense of morality become more expansive. For example, if someone considers members of other ethnic groups outside of their own as part of their community, intersectionality may shift the morality of that individual to reflect their membership amongst a variety of groups. The individual may

---

32 I capitalize "Ethics" to differentiate between the term "ethics" and the academic field of Ethics.

33 John Deigh, ed., "What Is Ethics?," in *An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511750519.002.

34 Ibid, 8.

35 Ibid, 8.

seek to integrate norms from the various groups they connect with, rejecting some norms from one society and incorporating norms from another to weave a coherent morality for themselves. Given the focus of this paper on the ethnographic analysis of particular groups of people, I situate the terms “ethics” and “ethic” within the framework of conventional morality rather than a universal one.

I use the term “ethic” to denote a system or framework of moral principles that pertain to a specific behavior or conduct. I will, henceforth, refer to multiple systems of moral principles pertaining to a specific behavior as ethic(s) to differentiate from the term “ethics”. As I describe these ethic(s), I present them as an ethic[36] engaged within a particular community or individual rather than alluding to a universal ethic shared by all without nuance. I argue that it is possible for an ethic to operate within a spectrum pertaining to the behavior in question. An ethic can be a low ethic, holding the behavior loosely, a high ethic, holding the behavior tightly as a focus, or even somewhere in between.

The term “ethical”, then, indicates anything that refers to the moral principles of an individual within the norms of their society or group. Here, ethical is not used as a term representing universal moral correctness; rather, it is a general reference to the normative moral principles of an individual within the norms of their society or group. In contrast, “virtue” assumes a moral correctness towards a common good within a particular society or group.

I use “virtue” as a term to represent a socially constructed, ultimate, moral good for a given society or group. Compared to “ethic”, every virtue is inherently an ethic that pertains to a laudable behavior or conduct in a society, but not every ethic is a virtue. The difference is that a virtue is an ethic that is ranked as imperative to living a good life within a society.[37] My use of the term “virtue” aligns with virtue ethicist Nancy Snow’s view of virtue as social intelligence. She explains that if social intelligence is a collection of cognitive-affective processes that help people live life with others, virtues are a form of social intelligence that help people achieve a subset of social living:

---

[36] I purposely use the phrase “an ethic of” rather than “the ethic of.”

[37] Again, within the frame of conventional morality, what is determined as *good* depends on the norms of the given society or group in question.

a good life.[38] Humans are social beings that construct meaning by interacting with the world around us. Thus, our objectivity and interpretations are built on subjective encounters and noting consistent patterns within them. We correct our actions and character dispositions based on feedback from our surroundings: its affirmations, silences, or disapprovals.[39] Virtue, then, represents an ethic that has been affirmed and reified as an ultimate good within a society.

As I theorize an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, it is important to acknowledge that I do so from my social location as a quare[40] African American woman living in the United States. While my Diola ancestors had different life experiences than my own in modern-day America, I believe that theorizing from a diasporic lens may reveal ethical frameworks that have been passed along generationally before and after the Transatlantic Slave Trade; ethical frameworks that continue to evolve in today's world.

An Ethic of Resistance

In her groundbreaking work, Black Womanist Ethics, Katie G. Cannon reveals the inefficiency of dominant Western discourses in theological ethics to address the ethical frameworks that pertain to African American women. Dominant Western narratives in this field favor a universal morality that assumes that valid moral agents possess both freedom and self-directed, self-determined power,[41] suggesting that moral agents have the freedom

[38] Nancy E. Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 85.

[39] Snow, 90.

[40] Though the term *quare*, coined by E. Patrick Johnson, can be used as both a noun and adjective, in this paper, *quare* represents members of the LGBTQIA+ community who also identify as non-white individuals. Quare theory brings to the fore the epistemologies of LGBTQ people of color, much like womanism centers the epistemologies of women of color. Similarly, quare theory acknowledes the importance of intersectionality. Johnson's etymology of the word quare builds on and mimics Alice Walker's four-part definition of womanism. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 127, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/monograph/book/69514.

[41] Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series 60 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1988), 2–3.

and power to choose whether to suffer and voluntarily "carry [one's] cross".[42] By such notions, the subjugation of African American women by chattel slavery and the multidimensional oppressions of race, sex, and class render an ethical framework for African American women not only invisible but intrinsically immoral;[43] an advantageous foundation for white supremacy. Within this narrative, African American women do not have the same agency to choose responsible action within the dominant ethical framework, which Sharon Welch names an ethic of control. Instead, Cannon's ethical framework for African American women resembles more of an ethic of resistance, cultivated within the backdrop of multidimensional struggle.[44]

Ethic of resistance	Ethic of control
A system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in ways that sustain and defend the personhood of a moral agent and/or the humanity of its self-defined community against perceived dehumanization.	A system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in such a way that sustains or expands the power and/or status of a moral agent and its self-defined community.

Following the above definition, an ethic of resistance then seeks to resist attacks on human dignity. This definition is developed from Katie G. Cannon's and Delores Williams's[45] accounts of resistance and survival within Black women's lives and literary traditions, along with E. Patrick Johnson's explication of quare theory—a theory by and for queer[46] people of color. [47] A recurring theme that arises throughout each of these works,

42 Cannon, 3.

43 Cannon, 2.

44 See Cannon's descriptions of Zora Neale Hurton's resistance in Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

45 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

46 I use the term *queer* in this paper to represent the spectrum of members within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. The term also encompasses other sexual and/or gender identities not encompassed within its acronym letters (+).

47 I use the terms *people of color* and *communities of color* as umbrella terms that denote those who identify as non-White in the United States.]

along with my own lived experience, is the defense of one's sense of physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual personhood in a world that seeks to deny or destroy it. Behind these resistance and endurance strategies is the constant struggle to claim innate human dignity and worth. Williams explicitly names a "doctrine of resistance" that is passed down from enslaved mothers to their children. She recalls:

> [a]n ex-slave woman told of the doctrine of resistance passed on to her by her slave mother, who refused to be whipped by slave owners. The daughter claimed that with all her ability to work, she [the enslaved mother] did not make a good slave. She was too high spirited and independent. The one doctrine of my mother's teaching which was branded upon my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me.[48]

Abuse, whether intentional or unintentional, is an attack on personhood as it dehumanizes a subject into that of an object to be used or discarded. This slave mother knew she could work but refused to do so under abusive conditions that denied her a sense of humanity or personal worth. Thus, her fight and teachings reflect an ethic of resistance that values the defense of personhood, rebelling against the status quo, regardless of the risk. Systems of enslavement born in the ancient world continue today in evolved forms, whether physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional, perpetuating the abuse of human beings. Generational teaching of a doctrine of resistance has credence on moral principles that shape one's actions towards the betterment of the community. In Williams' example, the mother holds a set of moral principles that value human dignity and communal health as a good. Thus, being a "good slave" in the society the mother lives within is rendered immoral as it enables the dehumanization of herself and her community. The mother rebels accordingly through her actions of refusal and the dissemination of her knowledge to her children.

Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson views quare theory as a "theory in the flesh" that merges both theory and practice through an "embodied politic of resistance".[49] This politic manifests in the common traditions of

---

[48] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 137.

[49] Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 127.

performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art, emphasizing experiential diversity within LGBTQAI+[50] communities of color. It seeks to narrow the gap between the disparity of theory and practice within queer studies, rooting epistemology in the body. It "necessarily engenders identity politics" in a way that "acknowledges difference within and between particular groups".[51] As Johnson explains:

> identity politics does not necessarily mean the reduction of multiple identities into a monolithic identity or narrow cultural nationalism. Rather, quare studies moves beyond simply theorizing subjectivity and agency as discursively mediated to theorizing how that mediation may propel material bodies into action.[52]

Borrowing from quare theory, within my theory of an ethic of resistance, the unique way an individual or group defines their personhood shapes their moral and ethical actions. It can manifest itself not only in political action but also in the performance of rituals, art, and cultural storytelling. For example, as African poet Tijan Sallah explains, proverbs are used to teach moral principles and life lessons in Diola cultures.[53] One Diola proverb that points to an ethic of resistance is "Busanay bati Abantan o kone, inayool api manaiko mapinco banomer", or "They say that his mother always put him in danger, for prettiness is bought with a heifer". Sallah explains that this proverb criticizes the practice of a "bride price for women" that reduces the value of a woman's personhood to her physical appearance in lieu of valuing the discernment of common values or shared goals in life between a bride and suitor.[54] These egalitarian notions were also embodied by Diatta through symbolism and oral tradition. In the rites of Houssahara—one of Diatta's spirit shrines—and in various songs about her, Diatta wields a spear during funeral rituals, a tool typically associated with men in Diola culture.[55]

---

50 At the time of Johnson's conception of quare theory, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities were at forefront of sexual and gender expression; however, I have referenced LBGTQAI+ here to more fully represent the movement in scholarship in sexuality and gender expression.

51 Ibid, 135.

52 Ibid, 135.

53 Sallah, "Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia," 100.

54 Ibid, 100.

55 Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 161.

Similarly, another song describes her as "a strong woman, courageous, [and] brave like an elephant".[56] The Diola typically held elephant symbolism almost exclusively for men who exuded strength, courage and bravery.[57] Diatta's ritual performance and songs about her, thus, defend against the denigration of women's personhood.

An Ethic of Control

I define an ethic of control as a system of moral principles that constructs agency, responsibility, and goodness in such a way that sustains or expands the power and/or status of the moral agent and its self-defined community. Thus, an ethic of control seeks to control one's power and/or status in a society. This definition offers nuance to feminist ethicist Sharon Welch's own description in A Feminist Ethic of Risk,[58] along with descriptions of dominant Western ethical frameworks from Black Womanist Ethics[59] and Sisters in the Wilderness.[60] For example, according to Welch, one notable aspect of an ethic of control within privileged white communities is that their conception of responsible action is predicated on an "intrinsically immoral balance of power", favoring the moral agent.[61] Thus, an ideology of supremacy is intrinsic within this high ethic of control. Furthermore, this inequitable balance of power enables the moral agent to assume that one can guarantee their actions are efficacious. As such, when complex problems arise, the moral agent is more likely to suffer from a "striking paralysis of will".[62] Welch discerns this complicity towards the status quo to be the plight of white feminists in addressing systemic injustice.

When evaluating the role of personhood within such a framework, it can be detrimental when personhood is conflated with power and status. In societies where wealth accumulation is considered a societal power, poor communities are deemed to have less worth—personhood—as they do not

56 Ibid, 161.

57 Ibid, 162.

58 Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 14 and 17.

59 Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 2–3.

60 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 85.

61 Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 17.

62 Ibid, 17.

possess equal power or freedom. Worth, then, is synonymous with material wealth production. Similarly, those with less education may also be perceived to have lesser worth as education often correlates to higher economic status. The conflation of power and status with personhood is reminiscent of the dominant Western discourse of ethics that Cannon fought against in the Academy. I assert that a high ethic of control that conflates power and status with personhood exists as a dominant ethic within the ethos of a colonizer that uses ideologies of supremacy to support its domination. For example, David Chidester notes that the subjugation of indigenous African peoples was necessary for the successful propagation of supremacist histories of religion. This subjugation deemed African religious traditions as “primitive”, “barbaric”, and “savage”, legitimizing in the eyes of the colonizer the domination of indigenous peoples.[63] This notion is similar to that of Jonathan Tran’s domination-exploitation-justification feedback loop that undergirds the cycle of use-identity-justification within racial capitalism.[64] Such a high ethic of control has the danger of becoming a virtue within a supremacist society.

However, a positive example of an ethic of control can be found within social justice movements that value equity across multiple social groups. For those occupying lesser social positions in a society, fighting to elevate one’s status to be equal to those in higher social locations would also indicate an ethic of control. For example, from the late 1820s to 1851, trading treaties were fairly diplomatic, albeit still tense, between French officials and Diola townships of the Lower Casamance area without military force.[65] However, after the French began excluding other Europeans from the area and forced their sovereignty upon the area, armed rebellions from Diola townships started to occur.[66] When taxes were levied, and particular crops were imposed by the French to expand their power and status inequitably, the Diola sought to fight back by withholding those taxes and refusing to incorporate peanuts and cotton as cash crops.[67] Within an ethic of control, the Diola people sought to

63 David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 2014), xii–xiii, xix–xx.

64 Jonathan Tran, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 74–75.

65 Baum, *West Africa’s Women of God*, 65–66.

66 Baum, 66.

67 Baum, 66.

maintain their own sovereignty and power against those who wished to take it from them in political ways. In the narrative of the Diola's revolutionary prophet, Aline Sitoë Diatta, we find examples of attempts to shift political and social imbalances towards equity—an ethic of control. We also find a defense of both individual and communal personhood—an ethic of resistance. However, there is significance in who defines this precious personhood for Diatta—the supreme being Emitai.

Exegeting Lived Theology from *À La Recherche Aline* and its Connection to an Ethic of Resistance and an Ethic of Control

My mother told me that she was a woman who dared to stand up to the whites to protect the crops. And for a Diola, that's something. She went where no man dared to go. She did what no man dared to do. That's why I respect her.[68]

Nga Nga Rokhaya Bayo, age 24.
Diola actress who plays Aline Sitoë Diatta in À La Recherche Aline

Given the richness of oral tradition and religious ritual within Diola culture in lieu of written literature,[69] narrative reenactments of Diatta's story can serve as a text to exegete her theology through oral and visual reception history.[70] In this spirit, I will briefly interpret a general narrative of Diatta's life within the short film *À la recherche Aline*. The reenactments of Diatta's story by local Diola people in Senegal give us a glimpse of the reception history that continues to mobilize collective resistance against white supremacy.

Narratives from the Film

In 2020, a short film was released by student filmmaker Rokhaya Marieme Balde, who had returned to her home country of Senegal to create a film about her ancestor and great-great-aunt, Aline Sitoë Diatta.[71] *À La*

---

68 *À La Recherche Aline*, Short, Biography (HEAD - Genève, 2020), https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p0crc8x5/the-supernatural-powers-of-the-african-joan-of-arc.

69 Sallah, "Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia," 95.

70 Reception history reflects how a particular audience receives a text or story in their own cultural context.

71 *Seeking Aline*.

Recherche Aline (*Seeking Aline*) not only presents a visual dramatization of Aline's story, but also chronicles Balde's research interviews with locals about Aline. To offer examples of an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control operative within Diatta's narrative and her lived theology, I draw attention to two particular reenactments: Diatta's call from Emitai and Diatta confronting her people on resisting French taxation.

Diatta's Call

The film opens with a cinematic view of Aline Sitoé, a golden crown on her head where she is beckoned by Emitai to the middle of a sandy beach at night: "Don't be afraid, it is God talking to you".[72] At first, Emitai manifests through a distorted masculine voice, appearing as three men covered in gold and adorned with larger golden crowns. Emitai tells Aline, "I am sending you to your people".[73] Emitai tells Aline to inform her people that Emitai is unhappy and that they are to "rise up".[74] Aline is to be Emitai's messenger. She attempts to refuse several times, saying, "Forgive me, I cannot", only to find herself being driven back by Emitai to the crashing waves behind her.[75] Emitai tells her that she cannot refuse and must give the message: "Only you can do it. You can't refuse".[76] She awakes in her bed, startled by this dream.

This reenactment of Aline's dream reflects how those on the *awasena* path believe Emitai interacts with human existence. We get a glimpse of how the aforementioned soul travel may have been portrayed in previous generations. Corroborating other ethnographic accounts like Baum's, the scene reveals that this supreme being can bless people but may also be unhappy about the collective acceptance of injustice. In this case, Emitai is asking for the Diola people to rise up and resist the French colonizers. Emitai gives Aline, a young woman, the authority to become Emitai's messenger. She is sent to her people to share both the unhappiness of Emitai and empower them to rise up against oppressive forces. Emitai's empowerment reflects an ethic of resistance as it encourages the defense of personhood, dignity, and the worth of a collective people towards human equity. At the

---

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.

same time, Diatta cannot refuse Emitai's call to help her people, revealing the power dynamics between the supreme deity and human beings. Emitai uses coercive power by forcing Diatta towards rising waves as she attempts to refuses. Consequently, Diatta must honor both the status of Emitai as more powerful and defend against the loss of power for her people, reflecting an ethic of control.

Resisting Colonial Capitalism

In another pivotal reenactment in the film that depicts both an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, Diatta stands up against the male elders of the village who wish to concede to French taxation and crop propagation. Before this scene, Aline had started her prophetic journey by boldly ordering female rice producers to stop spreading rice and pray for rain. She tells them that they must listen to her because Emitai sent her. Through much perseverance, she eventually succeeds in convincing the producers to perform the rain ritual with her. The next scene, however, starts with three male Diola elders standing before their community who are seated on the ground in front of them. An elder shares:

> The white men came. He wants to tax us. We must give them rice, but we don't have enough to feed our families. So, he wants us to grow groundnut. Let's grow groundnut. That way, we'll have enough to pay the tax and feed our families. If we don't cooperate, things will be hard. We must grow groundnut because rice alone will not be enough to pay all the taxes the whites are imposing on us. That's why I order that we grow groundnut. That way, we'll be freed from this burden. So, let's grow groundnut.[77]

Aline bursts from her seat, jumping up to confront the elders, exclaiming that they must not grow groundnut (peanuts). Diatta's outburst shocks of all the bystanders. Moreover, she stands in front of the elders in an attempt to block them. She faces the community and tells them, "No one will grow groundnut; we'll just grow rice".[78] The crowd jeers, asking "Who are you?".[79] Aline replies, "It's not up to you", referring to who has the authority to determine

[77] *Seeking Aline*.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

what they will produce as a community for food.[80] The crowd offers mixed responses, with some saying, “She is too young”, while others wish to hear her speak.[81] As some villagers attempt to seize her, she falls to her knees, performing the rain ritual shown at the beginning of the film, pushing away from those who wish to keep her bound. A young girl joins in, singing the ritualistic song, and soon, the entire community joins. Thunder sounds, and it begins to rain. The camera pans to Aline, who is still performing the ritual. She is soon happily surrounded by her Diola people joining in the rain ritual with her: men, women, and children together.

In this reenactment, Diatta literally takes the place of the male elders with her body, ordering her people to grow the traditional cash crop of the Diola people: rice. Despite jeers from the crowd, she remains firm in her own personhood, empowered as Emitai’s messenger. The choice of what crop to grows is not up to the community; the choice is Emitai’s, who wants the Diola to “rise up”. In protest, Diatta performs the rain ritual, inspiring and empowering other young women to join in resisting alongside her. Diatta helps to return her people to the traditions that defend their cultural identity and connect them to their supreme deity—an ethic of resistance. An ethic of control is found both within the elders and community, who are appalled by Aline’s brazenness, stepping out of her role or status in society, questioning “Who are you?”.[82] However, Aline’s perseverance in front of the community and elders, seeking equality as a voice of reason, also indicates an ethic of control, empowered again by her role as messenger of Emitai.

Conclusion

Diatta’s *awasena* theology, fostered by her commitment to the Diola *awasena* path, underscores the importance of Emitai, who defines personhood for the Diola community in positive ways that subvert attacks from white supremacist colonialism. The European compromise of taking groundnut labor for tax and devaluing indigenous productions not only compromised the Diola people’s ability to feed their families, but also threatened their personhood as stewards of Emitai’s gifts of knowledge and provision through rice production. The status that the Diola supreme being

---

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 *Seeking Aline*.

provides Diatta, as "one whom Emitai sent", could have been easily abused. History had shown religious leaders who had been more focused on wealth than equity or the preservation of the *awasena* tradition (also reflective of an ethic of control).[83] However, the grounding of *awasena* theology, one with a supreme deity that seeks the *good* of their people against social and material injustice, provides Diatta with a basis from which to discern a *healthy* sense of personhood. It is a personhood that values equity between all human beings, reflective of a high ethic of resistance. *Awasena* theology, ultimately, shapes their adherents' moral and ethical character by forming a community that acts as one unit. For Diatta, the use of both an ethic of resistance and an ethic of control, empowered by *awasena* religion and its subsequent theology, offers a means to survive in a supremacist environment without complete assimilation into harmful systems of oppression and the forgetfulness of self or community: an inspiration to the African diaspora for generations to come.

83 Baum, *West Africa's Women of God*, 170–71.

References

À La Recherche Aline. Short, Biography. HEAD - Genève, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p0crc8x5/the-supernatural-powers-of-the-african-joan-of-arc.

Baum, Robert M. *West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.

Bell, Dianna. "Introduction to Roundtable Commentary for West Africa's Women of God: Alinesitoué and the Diola Prophetic Tradition." *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 1 (2018): 123–26.

Cannon, Katie G. *Black Womanist Ethics*. American Academy of Religion Academy Series 60. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.

———. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Chidester, David. *Empire of Religion : Imperialism and Comparative Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Deigh, John, ed. "What Is Ethics?" In *An Introduction to Ethics*, 1–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511750519.002.

Johnson, E. Patrick, and Mae G. Henderson. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/monograph/book/69514.

Marsh, Charles, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds. *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Sallah, Tijan M. "Jola Verbal Arts of Casamance, Senegal, and the Gambia: A Question in Search of a Literature." In *Routledge Handbook of Minority Discourses in African Literature*, 1st ed., 89–102. Routledge, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429354229-9.

Snow, Nancy E. *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Tran, Jonathan. *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Welch, Sharon D. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

On/Unstained White dress(es): Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets

Anna Kasafi Perkins[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Dr Anna Kasafi Perkins is a Senior Programme Officer in the Quality Assurance Unit in the Office of the Board for Undergraduate Studies, The University of the West Indies Regional Headquarters (UWI), and adjunct faculty at St Michael's Theological College.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
University of the West Indies Regional Headquarters
St Michael's Theological College, Kingston, Jamaica
anna.perkins@uwimona.edu.jm

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7370-3661

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/ad6nbz62

ABSTRACT

There is a white dress – baptismal, communion or confirmation – that appears in select poems of three Caribbean women poets, Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Trinidad/Canada) and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica). The dress is intended to be worn by Afro-Caribbean girls in a church, sacred, or sacramental context and speak to matters of purity in the female/girl child who is so clad. At the same time, the dress - spotless or yellowed - exposes the impurity, danger, and impiety of the Afro-Caribbean female body that is laid bare in the sacramental and sacred space of Church. This article will explore the experience of "sacred misogynoir" as expressed in Rahim, Philip, and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Drawing on the work of C. M. Webster, which unveils how Christian practices exiled Afro-Caribbean women from human and feminine value systems, I draw attention to how these women counter such disvaluing with bodily practices that promoted, (re)valued, and affirmed their body-selves, especially in sacred spaces. Webster's research, in conversation with these poets, illustrates the need for a reframing and revaluing of the Afro-Caribbean female body in sacred spaces such that white dresses no longer function to oppress and devalue.

KEYWORDS
Sacred misogynoir, Jennifer Rahim, M. NourbeSe Philip, Barbara Ferland, C.M. Webster

On/Unstained White dress(es): Christianity and Female Purity in Three Caribbean Women Poets

There is a white dress – baptismal, communion or confirmation – that appears in the poems of three Caribbean women poets, Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Tobago/Canada) and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica/England). The dress is intended to be worn by an Afro-Caribbean girl in a church, sacred, or sacramental context and speaks loudly of matters of purity in the female/girl child, who is so clad. At the same time, the dress - spotless or yellowed - exposes the impurity, danger, and impiety of the Afro-Caribbean female body that is laid bare in the sacramental/sacred space of Church, where white is symbolic of purity and holiness. White is,

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

therefore, an important color in Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Communion and Confirmation. Of course, the symbolism of white and purity is not limited to mainstream Christianity, as can be seen by its presence in Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. In the Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean religious forms, such as Revival in Jamaica and Spiritual Baptist in Trinidad and Tobago, also maintain a complex system of symbolism involving color choice for garments and headgear. Austin-Broos, for example, describes the wearing of white head wraps among female Zion Revivalists during divine worship "[as] signifying their purified state".[1]

This article explores the experience of "sacred misogynoir", that is, the double discrimination faced by Black women for being both Black and female in the religious sphere, as expressed in Rahim, Philip, and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Christianity was violently or forcibly imposed on the Black people in the Caribbean and among its legacies is a "holy misogyny", upon which such sacred misogynoir is premised. It highlights the seemingly inevitable misogyny in Western Christianity that has removed women from sacred significance while simultaneously imposing discriminating purity customs.[2] Purity culture in the evangelical movement "promotes a biblical view of sexual purity by requiring strict adherence to sexual abstinence before marriage and supporting only heterosexual, married, and monogamous forms of sexual activity".[3] Indeed, it can be considered as perhaps the starkest of contemporary forms of sacred misogyny and misogynoir. The purity movement is not singular to evangelicalism but has also entered Catholic Church spaces, reinforced by the Catholic catechism, youth bibles, and catechesis, as discussed by Cieslik:

> Although most contemporary reflection on purity culture has focused primarily on evangelical Christianity's Purity Movement between the

---

1 Diane J. Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 69.

2 April DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. (Continuum 2011).

3 Madison Natarajan, Kerrie G. Wilkins-Yel, Anushka Sista, Aashika Anantharaman, and Natalie Seils, Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 46, no 3 (2022): 317.

> 1990s and 2000s, the Catholic catechism, youth bibles, and religious education of many young Catholic women now in their 20s and 30s are beginning to feel the impact of this Movement on their subsequent relationships and sexual identities. It's about time that the American Catholic community reckon with the impact of this Movement on its young women.[4]

Of course, neither holy misogyny nor sacred misogynoir are inevitable, but, rather, expose underlying theological, political, and rhetorical groundings that, I argue, need to be continually challenged by counter-narratives of liberation expressing alternatives to the dominant worldview.

Drawing on the work of C. M. Webster,[5] this article demonstrates how Black Caribbean women counter such theological, political, and rhetorical foundations with bodily practices that promote, (re)value, and affirm their body-selves, especially in sacred spaces. Webster's research unveils how Christian beliefs and practices from the time of enslavement exiled Afro-Caribbean women from human and feminine value systems. By placing Webster's research in conversation with the poets Rahim, Philip, and Ferland, the article argues for a reframing and revaluing of the Afro-Caribbean female body in sacred spaces so that white dresses no longer function to oppress and devalue.

Somatic Narratives Resisting Sacralized Violence

Christianity has had a profound influence on the Caribbean woman's bio-political location and imaginings.[6] Indeed, Christianity was deployed in the Caribbean to manage and manipulate Black women's biological and social being to achieve political goals, such as maintaining control, maximizing

---

[4] Emma Cieslik, Guilty Mind, Guilty Body, Guilty Soul: (Im)Purity Culture in the American Catholic Church, *The New School*, no date. https://tns-gssi.newschool.org/2022/01/30/guilty-mind-guilty-body-guilty-soul-impurity-culture-in-the-american-catholic-church/

[5] Carol Marie Webster, Chat to Mi Back: Meditation on body archive, *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 11, no. 1 (2019): 49–66.
Carol Marie Webster, Body as Temple: Jamaican Catholic Women and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, *Journal of Black Theology* 15, no. 1 (2017): 21–40. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2017.1271582

[6] Webster, "Body as Temple".

(re)productivity, or promoting ideologies of inferiority and divinely ordained enslavement. This began with Christian complicity in the transatlantic trade of Africans leading to the subsequent enslavement of Africans within the brutal plantation complex in North America and the Caribbean, where racism and white supremacy determined African bodies as being "destined for servitude, imbued with innate inferiority and thus discard-able".[7] African women, in particular, were subjected to misogyny and misogynoir, with their very humanity and femininity devalued, existing on the border between animal and human and, therefore, outside the realm of moral concern. Their bodies were considered merely chattel, where their sexual, sensual, reproductive, and manual labor was owned and appropriated for the benefit of others, namely the enslaver and his or her family.[8] Slave narratives from the Caribbean and the Americas provide disturbing evidence of the brutality of the enslavers who professed Christianity.[9] For example, in the slave narrative "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs (writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent), there are numerous examples of Christian enslavers abusing female slaves.[10] One notable record shows how Dr Flint, who enslaved Jacobs, uses his status as a Christian to justify exploiting and abusing her. Despite being a religious man, having converted to Church of England, he repeatedly sexually harasses and assaults Jacobs during her enslavement. He uses his authority and power over her to coerce her into sexual relationships, threatening her with punishment or separation from her children if she refuses. Despite Jacobs's pleas for mercy and attempts to resist his advances, Flint persists in his predatory behaviour.

Jacobs describes how Flint manipulates the Christian teachings, such as Ephesians 6:1, to justify his actions.[11] He claims that God has given him

---

7 Webster, "Body as Temple," 21-22.

8 Women, including women of color, also owned slaves. See Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

9 SallyAnn H. Ferguson, Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative, *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (June 1996):

10 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover, 2001).

11 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on

authority over his enslaved people and that it is his duty to “break her will” and assert his dominance. Religion is used as a tool of control and oppression, enabling the exploitation of Jacobs’ vulnerability as an enslaved woman and mother. Flint, like many others, twisted Christian principles to suit his own desires. The narrative of Mary Prince, born on the Caribbean island of Bermuda, similarly details the sexual and physical violence to which she was subject at the hands of her Christian enslavers.[12]

Given the similarities of the system of enslavement in the Caribbean and North America, it is unsurprising, therefore, that Mitzi J. Smith argues that, white enslavers had unlimited access to the bodies of enslaved women during slavery.[13] They would force or coerce these women to submit to their sexual advances. Moreover, they would coerce or force the women to reproduce with enslaved men to maintain the labor force. This became increasingly the practice once the transatlantic trade was made illegal. Even when religious ritual was deployed,

> [t]he Christian baptism of captive African girls and women, at port of embarkation and/or entry, ushered them into lives in which virtue would be systematically denied them. Baptism ushered them into collective systems (economic, cultural and religious) designed to rip, strip, whip and bludgeon virtue from their bodies. Only in this way could they be held separate and apart from those “other” female bodies who were “privileged” in enslavement culture and economy.[14]

Even after the abolition of slavery, African-descended women were still subject to coercion and force; women could be raped with impunity by men inside and outside of their communities. The dominant culture continued to regard African-descended women as “inferior and unworthy of the same

---

you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (New International Version).

12 Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Paperback (First Rate Publishers, 2015).

Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality and Biblical Interpretation*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018).

14 Webster, “Body as Temple”, 26.

respect granted to white women generally".[15] Women and girls in the Caribbean today continue to be the majority victims of sexual violence, especially poor, "Ghetto" women, who are the most vulnerable owing to having minimal or no education (and, thus, are economically vulnerable).[16] Such bodies could and have been subjected to sacralized violence and violations that continues to reverberate in contemporary Afro-Caribbean women's experiences, as the story of Rastafarian Nzingha King and many others demonstrate.[17]

Nevertheless, conversations about the bodies of enslaved women did not begin or end with Christianity's flawed and violent oppression and domination. The scripts of inferiority and non-humanity imposed on these women existed in tension with other embodied scripts that valued and affirmed their bodies as sacred and divine. Particularly in conversation with notions of body as a temple in and through which divinity is present(ed).[18] Webster's research unearths examples of such scripts among women in the Roman Catholic Church in Jamaica, revealing a "way of being in the world that is not commonly articulated in dominant discourses of and about Caribbean women in general, and Jamaican women in particular".[19] Such "somatic narratives", that is, stories and meanings embedded in bodily

---

15 Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 120.

16 Other markers of vulnerability to intimate partner violence include being under thirty and having either been pregnant or begun living with a partner while underage. See Anna Kasafi Perkins, "Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women's Health Survey," in *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture,* edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019). 240-67.

17 jennifer s. leath*, Nontando Hadebe, Nicole Symmonds, and Anna Kasafi Perkins, "Black Feminism, Womanism, and Intersectionality Discourse: A Theo-Ethical Roundtable "intersectionality" as a hallmark of Critical Race Theory," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023); Anna Kasafi Perkins, "Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women's Health Survey," in . *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture,* edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer. (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019). *Please note jennifer leith does not capitalise her names.

18 Webster, "Body as Temple".

19 *Ibid,* 23.

performances, resisted colonial strategies to dehumanize and annihilate.[20] One of these somatic narratives central to the women's spirituality and performative practices in the liturgical space is "body as temple".[21] This embodied script links an "African cosmology that centres on body episteme in which the body is fundamental to cultural and religious life" with Christian notions of the self that continue to be meaningful.[22] Such African-derived cosmologies encompass a worldview that gives a sense of purpose and direction to people's lives and enables them to act purposefully and exercise a measure of control over their environment.[23] "Body as temple" functions as part of "body as archive", whereby Webster[24]

> identifies an understanding of the body that recognizes bodily artefacts as stored in individual and collective bodies for future generations to excavate, critically interrogate, re-craft and/or restore and deploy in the fashioning of present-day individual and community identities, life possibilities and future world imaginings.[25]

Poems contribute to the "body archive" to be excavated, interrogated, recrafted and restored in fashioning the life possibilities of Afro-Caribbean women in the sacred space.

Three poets, three dresses

The three poets at the center of this conversation unveil somatic narratives of the Afro-Caribbean female body within the context of Christian worship that exhibit ideas and practices steeped in sacred misogynoir. Indeed, Church or school are the contexts where many a Caribbean girl is shaken out of her "blissful innocence" concerning patriarchal norms and the meaning of her African body-self. There, too, she encounters the complexities of

---

20 Webster, "Chat to Mi Back".

21 Webster, "Body as Temple".

22 *Ibid* 23.

23 Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, The dimensions of African cosmology, *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 2, no. 2 (2013):

24 Webster, "Chat to Mi Back".

25 *Ibid,* 51.

Caribbean sexuality that oftentimes, resists such patriarchal and misogynistic social norms.[26]

> *"White in Organdy, Meadowed in Lace"*
> A little girl, (the Lord is with thee.)
> White in organdy, Lifts her starched, black face
> Towards the barricaded altar
> Meadowed in lace. (Ferland, lines 5-9)

The first of the three poets, and also a Jamaican musician, Barbara Ferland (1919-2003), wrote in the 1950s when Jamaica was a colony of Great Britain. Her poem "Ave Maria" ("Hail Mary" in English) first appears in a 1950s mimeo of the *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, collected by Jamaicans W. Adolphe Roberts and Wycliffe Bennett. Since then, it has featured in several anthologies including a special issue of the journal *Caribbean Quarterly* (1958), *Voice Print: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry for the Caribbean* (Brown and Morris 1990), and *Time for Poetry - A Workshop Approach for CXC*.[27]

The title, "Ave Maria", references a devotional prayer said to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in the Roman Catholic Church, the "Hail Mary".[28] The "Hail Mary" alludes to Luke 1:35 where the girl Mary is addressed by an Angel, who tells her she will be the mother of the savior. The "Hail Mary" is incorporated into a longer meditative prayer called the Rosary, which is often prayed while using a string of beads also called the rosary. Mary's story and that of her son Jesus are reflected on meditatively as the various decades

---

[26] Carole Boyce Davies, "Secrets of Sweetness," in Caribbean Erotic: poetry, prose and essays, edited by Opal Palmer Adisa and Donna Aza Weir-Soley. (Leeds, UK: Peepal Press, 2012).

[27] Nahdjla Carasco Bailey, Time for Poetry - A Workshop Approach for CXC. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[28] AVE MARIA, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

of the rosary are prayed in unison by the Catholic faithful. In Ferland's "Ave Maria", children are praying the rosary in a church. Perhaps it is First Communion Day, given the finery they wear, although out of respect people tended to wear their best to Church.[29] The children repeat the words of the Hail Mary in rote, sing song fashion: "Skipping syllables, Follow-the-Leader pace" (Ferland, line 4). This is unsurprising as, prior to 1965, Mass was delivered in Latin and not the vernacular so most Catholics would not have been able to fully participate.[30] Many of them prayed the rosary throughout in rather rote fashion, disconnected from the ritual around them. The Gospel, the most important reading, and the homily would have been in English. Unmentioned, but lurking, is the presence of the White,[31] ex patriot, missionary priest leading the ritual.

The rhythm of the poem mimics the praying of "Ave Maria", confirmed by the interspersing of words of the prayer (enclosed in parentheses) at significant points throughout. Ferland re-shapes the source prayer "with West African cultural traces, illustrat[ing] deep-rooted Christian piety".[32] The poetic voice looks and listens in as the children intone and drone the rosary. In the poem, "a little girl (the Lord is with Thee)" is described: "White in organdy/[she]lifts her starched, black face/Towards the barricaded altar/Meadowed in lace" (Ferland, lines 5-9). The juxtaposition of the Angel's greeting to Mary, "the Lord is with Thee", which is the second line of the "Hail Mary", with the introduction of the little Black girl immediately recasts her as capable of reflecting and containing the divine. Ferland revalues the little girl, affirming the sacredness of her body. She is, perhaps ironically, cast as "White", reflecting/sharing the color of the organdy dress she dons (organdy is a lightweight, sheer, yet stiff fabric, usually made of cotton). Its crisp stiffness is typically achieved with the aid of (white) starch, which is used to describe

29 Mary L. Zimmerman, Vatican II and The Liturgy: Revisiting Lost Traditions. Master of Arts in Liberal Studies thesis. (The State University of New Jersey, 2011).

30 Zimmerman, "Vatican II and The Liturgy".

31 White is capitalized to designate White as a racial category, pushing back against suggestions that it should be lowercase, unlike Black, since it refers simply to skin color. To do so is to continue the myth that White is not a racial identity.

32 Gordon Collier, "At the gate of cultures" of the New World Religion, Mythology, and Folk-Belief in West Indian Poetry," in *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion en Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*, edited by Jamie S. Scott. (Brill Series: Cross/Cultures 22. Brill, 1996), 238.

the child's black face. She, a Black colonial subject, is graced and, perhaps, (over)shadowed by a black God of the RastafarI. In Webster's oeuvre, her body signifies and is a temple in which divinity dwells.

At the same time, the description of her face as starched suggests excessive piety and seriousness engendered by the sacred space filled with misogynoiristic ritual and symbolism. Notably, the altar, also a sacred object, could only be approached by the male priest and male altar servers, hence, being barricaded by altar rails, it is "meadowed" in white lace, again, pointing to and bringing about the sacredness of the space. However, it is more likely that it is the little girl who is so "meadowed". Perhaps she is wearing the customary chapel mantilla (veil) expected of women and girls then, in deference to Church law shaped by the Pauline injunction: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a woman ought to wear a veil on her head, for the sake of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:7–10).[33]

Her stiff countenance contrasts with the jouissance of Afro-Christian worship as well as the joys of living perhaps imaged in the longed-for ripe fruit, hanging temptingly but out of reach on a branch outside the Church window. Such descriptions of ripeness are often used in the Caribbean to depict a young girl in the flower of adolescence; ripe fruit ready to be plucked by a man, any man, as was their wont from the time of enslavement. (She is the early blooming cyclamen girl of M. NourbeSe Philip discussed below.). This ripe fruit girl contrasts with the fruit of Mary's womb (Jesus) and Mary herself, for she, according to Christian dogma, remains chaste and virgin despite giving birth. However, the fruit is also a more mundane signifier, for Mary is petitioned to "Bend low the laden bough/Child-high; sweeten her incense-

[33] These days, the traditional practice of the veil is being reclaimed by some Catholic women, who describe it as a "veiling of the tabernacle", the box containing the living body of Christ, the host. See Emma Cieslik, "Veiling the Female Tabernacle: The Feminist Undertones to Catholic Women Rekindling Traditional Devotional Practice". [Blog - Faith Practices], *Feminist Studies in Religion*, December 21, 2021. https://www.fsrinc.org/veiling-the-female-tabernacle-the-feminist-undertones-to-catholic-women-rekindling-traditional-devotional-practice/

flavoured breath/with food, good Mary" (Ferland, lines 16-18). The little girl is hungry! Yet, her hunger, in a childhood shaped by Christian belief and ritual, is fed first by piety. It is no surprise, then, that Collier says that, in "Ave Maria", "Christian sentiments often confirm the consolatory social function of belief in the face of implicit or explicit adversity".[34] Yet, Ferland rejects such consolatory religion, for real hunger needs to be treated first with food to sustain life.

"Ave Maria" closes with Mary being exhorted to pray for sinners "now"! Ferland pushes back on the idea of sinfulness as she adds, "And for the blameless,/Now, before the hour of their death" (Ferland, line 21). She reclaims the innocence of the girl child, who, as both Black and female, is blamed for sins of sexual impurity resulting from the legacy of missionary colonialism, which have become woven into the fabric of Caribbean life and culture.[35]

"Feeling a fraud dressed all in white"

> *"Feeling a fraud dressed all in white"*
> "What will the boys wear?"
> "Black trousers and white shirts," she said.
> "How come they get to wear black?"
> "Well, I suppose boys are allowed a little dirt," she said, laughing.
> (Rahim, lines12-17)

This preoccupation with female sinfulness and impurity is more explicit in Jennifer Rahim's work,[36] especially in the poem "First Communion Day" from her collection *Approaching Sabbaths*.[37] Renowned Jamaica poet and novelist Kei Miller describes Rahim (1963-2023) as one of the "exciting new poets in the Caribbean" and includes her in his anthology, *New Caribbean*

[34] Collier, "At the gate".

[35] Susan Shaw and Anuncia Escala, "Latin America and the Caribbean," in *Women and Religion: Global Lives in Focus* (Women and Society around the World), edited by Susan J. Shaw. (ABC-CLIO 2021).

[36] Jennifer Rahim died suddenly on March 23, 2023; she was only 60 years old.

[37] Jennifer Rahim, *Approaching Sabbaths: Poems*. (Peepal Press, 2009). See also "She Dreams of Falling" and "For Women like Us" in *Approaching Sabbaths*.

Poetry.[38] Indeed, I would describe her as the foremost poet of the Roman Catholic faith in the Caribbean, as her work is shaped by this faith, though she wrestles with and often pushes it aside even as it forms the bedrock of her musings. This is evident in "First Communion Day":

> On First Communion Day she felt a fraud
> dressed all in *white* like a bride.
> Her sins chimed like nursery rhymes
> in the confessional - all sang in perfect time,
> but one. No metre could order its horror.
> She prayed the others would cancel it out. (Rahim, lines 1-6; emphasis added)

The poetic voice in the poem has privileged access to the internal thoughts of a young girl all dressed in white "to take First Communion", the sacrament where a person receives the Holy Eucharist, consuming the consecrated bread and wine for the first time. At least twenty years separate Ferland's unnamed girl's experience and Rahim's similarly garbed girl, but the same concerns remain, though treated differently in the post-independence and post-Vatican context. With the reforms after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the celebration of the Mass is now more participatory. Gone are altar rails, mantillas, Latin Masses and remote priests, but the importance of white dresses for purity[39] in sacred spaces remains. Clergy and hierarchy are now, more often than not, local men, while women continue to be excluded from priesthood despite being active in the Church. Most Catholic children receive their First Holy Communion when they are at least seven years old, as this is considered the age of reason, when they are deemed to be morally responsible. Indeed, Rahim's girl child, "dressed all in white like

38 Kei Miller, *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology*. (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2007), xvi.

39 A white dress appears again in another Rahim long-form poem, "A Place" "XIII". This time it is a baptismal dress (2014, 82): "the balm that cures verse to scripture/as when newness opens unexpectedly/like unfurled wings, spotless/as a baptismal dress/redeems space" (Rahim 2014, 82). Here Rahim reclaims the value of the white garment, claiming its ability to cure, renew through its spotlessness. This baptismal dress, unlike its First Communion compere, calls to mind the biblical and the angelic. Here, the ritual of baptism wipes away all sin, especially original sin.

a bride” (Rahim, line 2), begins making judgments about her own (im)moral status. The very color of her dress provides a stark contrast to, and calls out, her “impure” moral state. While the fabric of this unnamed girl’s white dress is not proffered, we can assume it was of the kind of organdy worn by Ferland’s “little girl” or the satin-cotton of Philip’s cyclamen girl, as we see below.

Before First Communion or regular reception of the Eucharist, confessing sins is necessary to ensure that the communicant is ready to receive the spotless body of the Lord. Confession is but a ritual for Rahim’s girl child, however, as it does not give rise to the spotlessness promised. Like Ferland’s “little girl”, she engages in a routine Christian ritual of questionable meaningfulness as “her sins [are] chimed like nursery rhymes … all sang in perfect time” (Rahim, line 3), much like the rote repetition of the girl in “Ave Maria”. Similarly, there is a rote giving of answers in the Confirmation ceremony depicted by Philip in “Cyclamen Girl”, as well as a concern with “learning about sin”, which will be explored below. While the sin that elicits the feeling of fraudulence in the girl in “First Communion Day” is not detailed, it is perhaps not farfetched to suggest it was of a sexual nature given the comparison to the white of a bride for whom this is a symbol of virginity preserved.

This is confirmed in lines 7-11, where the girl child “still felt dirty”, “after kneeling beneath the crucifix”. She explains away her sadness to her mother, “I don’t like my dress”, receiving the response, “But you look beautiful. So innocent” (Rahim, line 11), or so “blameless” like Ferland’s girl child. The maternal response is loaded with irony, especially her subsequent laughing response to why boys are allowed to wear black, “Well, I suppose boys are allowed a little dirt” (Rahim, line 15). The ease of the contrast in meanings where white represents purity/sinlessness and black represents impurity/sinfulness is not lost on Rahim, nor her reader. The final line seals the deal, when the girl child states, “Then you should dress me like them” (Rahim, line 21). Implicitly, her white dress is seen to be stained as she is not worthy to wear it spotless. It is unclear whether the sexual activity implied is consensual; it is probable that it was not given the historical levels of

sexual abuse experienced by women and girls in the Caribbean.[40] Moreover, within Rahim's corpus there are several poems that treat with sexual abuse and its impact on women and girls, such as "Opening in Up"[41] and, as mentioned previously, "She Dreams of Falling" and "For Women like Us".[42]

Of course, the purity culture in Catholicism that is at the root of Rahim's girl child's feelings of guilt and shame, is not a new development. The Church "is known for [effectively] using guilt and shame to discourage sinfulness [especially sexual sinfulness]".[43] The female body is treated as a threat to male continence and women bear the burden of keeping men in line by learning to feel shame about their bodies and sexual feelings. Victims of sexual abuse, both inside and outside of the Church, are blamed for their own violation: What did she say? What did she wear? Intertwined with the Purity Movement of the late 1990s and 2000s, Catholic purity culture has had a damaging effect on the identities, health, and well-being of many young Catholic women,[44] particularly those of African descent whose cultural beliefs encode women as more prone to sinfulness, supposedly evidenced by their menstrual uncleanness.[45] Rahim avers to all these bio-political ideas and practices and pushes back against them in her telling (re)telling of the story of a white First Communion dress.

Early Bloomers in Satin-cotton

The cyclamen girl -yellowed confirmation dress-

---

40 Anna Kasafi Perkins, "Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women's Health Survey," in *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture*, edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer. (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019).

41 Rahim, *Approaching Sabbaths*.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Cieslik, "Guilty Mind".

44 *Ibid.*

45 Anna Kasafi Perkins, ""Shi Wi Use Har Blood Tie Him": A Theological Interrogation of Cultural Beliefs about Menstruation and Female [Im]morality in Jamaica," in *Memories of Caribbean Futures: reclaiming the precolonial to reimagine a postcolonial languages, literatures and cultures of the Greater Caribbean and beyond*, edited by Nicholas Faraclas, et al. (Puerto Rico/Curacao: University of Curacao, 2019), 175.

> (photography circa 1960)
> curls like copra[46] left to dry
> in the glare of unanswered questions/away
> from the brittle matrix of her coconut cocoon. (Philip, "Eucharistic Contradictions," lines 14-19)

M. NourbeSe Philip (born 1947) is explicit about the difficulties of the black girl in the sacred space, which overly structures the social space. Her collection, *She Tries Her Tongue*, *Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), is "a long poem composed of a series of shorter pieces grouped under section titles, all of them linked by the recurrent tropes of language and silence in the Caribbean herstory".[47] The second series is a section entitled, "Cyclamen Girl", in which Philip subjects religion to the same subversive treatment that she does language from the perspective of a woman.[48] "Cyclamen Girl" is named for the so-called poor man's orchid, which is said to bloom early and often. Moreover, cyclamen were believed to be intoxicants and aphrodisiacs. Ironically, the flowers have also been associated with miscarriages and so pregnant women avoided them. Seedek argues that Philip's work protests racist, gendered and sexual silencing of the colonized by the colonizers.[49] Philip draws upon the body, represented by the tongue, to break the silence imposed upon the cyclamen girl. Furthermore, she re-members and reclaims the body of the African female that was the "site of exploitation and [the] profoundly anti-human demands [of] forced reproduction along with subsequent forceful abduction

---

[46] Copra is the dried, white flesh of the coconut from which coconut oil is extracted. It is typically left to dry in the sun. Perhaps Philip's reference to copra speaks to both the girl and her hair, which may have been processed. Of course, the whiteness of the flesh of the coconut is akin to the now dried whiteness of the yellowed (aged) confirmation dress.

[47] Belén Martín Lucas, "Postmodern, postcolonial and feminist: Marlene Nourbese Philip's poems at a theoretical junction," in *La fabrique du genre: (dé)constructions du féminin et du masculin dans les arts et la littérature anglophones* [online]. (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008) https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.30712

[48] Edgardo Perez Montijo, "Eucharistic contradictions: Religious imagery in Marlene Nourbese Philips' "Cyclamen Girl". *The tower (Río Piedras)* 7, no 25 (2002).

[49] Abeer Refky Seedek, "The African Female Body as a form of Resistance in a Post-Colonialist Context: A Study of Marlene Nourbese Philip's She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 7, (May 2014).

and sale of children".[50] It is that same African female body which refuses to succumb to the anti-human deformation imposed upon her by the colonisers, as Webster highlights. Her body is the very site of resistance, containing the very tools needed to resist and survive - memory and history.[51]
The Cyclamen series consists of seven poems, represented in the discussion below by the short form in parentheses: "The Catechist" (TCat), "Eucharistic Contradictions" (EC), "The Catechism" (TC), "Vows" (V), "Transfiguration" (T), "The Communicant" (TCom) and "Epiphany" (E). Each poem gives a twist to the Christian ritual or festivity that its title announces through comments on a yellowed photograph of a girl in a communion dress (circa 1960), "black girl white dress" (Philip, "TCat" line 7), from four different perspectives: historical, religious, racial, and sexual. "In the poems, there is a constant movement back and forth between the portrait of the young girl, and the voice of the mature poet, who contemplates her".[52]

Philip admits that in the series of poems, she is trying to deconstruct her past, carefully examining "that coming of age",[53] passing from childhood into womanhood, "the cyclamen girl/caught between/blurred images of/massa and master" (Philip, "TCat" lines 26-29). The echoes of the patriarchal legacy of Enslavement ("massa") reverberates in the contemporary ("master"). At the same time, the Christian god is (re)present/ed in the White male enslaver (massa/master), who is the acclaimed "Massa God" in the Jamaican parlance. Both are rejected by Philip's subversive treatment.

The first poem, "The Catechist," captures the cyclamen girl on her Confirmation Day, arrayed in the prescribed white garments of sacramental purity for Western Christianity. Unlike Ferland's communicant, the cyclamen girl is dressed in satin-cotton (a soft, smooth, flowy fabric), "all the rage those days" with crinolines[54] stiff (Philip, "TCat" lines 2-6). "Vows" presents us with an overload or surfeit of white in the Ceremony, where six white items of

---

50 "The Absence" 24 in Seedek, "The African Female Body," 293.

51 Seedek, "The African Female Body".

52 Perez Montijo, "Eucharistic contradictions".

53 H. Nigel Thomas, "A rejoinder to prospero: an interview with M. Nourbese Philip," *Kola.* Mar 22, 2008. https://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=180798316

54 Crinolines were the flounced nylon and net petticoats worn in the 1950s and 1960s to poof out skirts.

clothing or accessories are listed: satin ribbons, cotton sox, Bata[55] shoes, Book of Common Prayer,[56] satin-cotton confirmation dress climaxing with "White/Soul" (Philip, "V" lines 1-12). Philip's critique of racist religion is clear. The accursed African body cannot be changed but the depraved African soul can be made "White". Similar echoes lurk behind Ferland's image of the little black girl's "starched face". The cyclamen girl subverts the very point of the ceremony in white, however, as she lies and speaks a promise in the Christian Trinity. Hers is belief "in and on/the 'the triune majesty' - /sunshine/black skin &/doubt/(in that order)" (Philip, "V" lines 21-26).

The poem "Transfiguration" speaks not of the full unveiling of Jesus's divinity to the disciples (Matt. 17:1-9), but to the transformation of the cyclamen girl into a woman, represented by "the ceremony of White". In this case, it refers to the sacrament of Confirmation, in which Catholics enter full Christian maturity. Part of the ritual of Confirmation involves the confirmand answering "present and ready" as her name is called. Philip plays on that name calling to salute the stolen and silenced ancestresses of the cyclamen girl by calling out the names of female goddesses from her African and Indigenous past. Even "Ave Maria"[57] and Aphrodite[58] are remembered as part of the past that has shaped her. Philip "deconstructively inserts Catholic and Anglican liturgy alongside initiatory invocations to Greek and West African divinities, in a collection that re-works New-World African female identity (that of a slave on an eighteenth-century sugar plantation) in a more impressionistic, less

---

55 Bata was a very popular shoe brand in the Caribbean in the 1960 and 1970s. It was founded in the Moravian town of Zlin, in what is now the Czech Republic. Its popularity in countries like Jamaica, which had its own experiment with democratic socialism, may have been related to its social welfare experiment. It combined efficiency with experiments in collectivism and profit-sharing. The company built employee housing, schools, shops, hospitals and recreation facilities.

56 This indicates that this is an Anglican not a Roman Catholic Confirmation ceremony. They are very similar in rite and meaning, however.

57 Ava Marie/Ava/Marie are girls' names in the Caribbean, which allude to the Virgin Mary.

58 Enslaved people were often given names from the Greek and Roman classics. See examples discussed of the enslaved families on the former Mona and Papine Estates, Suzanne Francis Brown, Mona, Past and Present: The History and Heritage of the Mona Campus, University of the West Indies. (Kingston, Jamaica, 2004). Also, Suzanne Francis Brown, "Finding Families within the Communities Enslaved on the Mona and Papine Estates, 1817-1832," *Caribbean Quarterly*. 51 (2005).

narrative-governed and multivocal way”.[59] Importantly, this newly initiated Christian cyclamen girl, whose “fleeting childhood/Passed like the blood/Of her first menses/Quick and painful” (Philip, “T” lines 18-21) must be named.

Beyond the actual photo, “Black girl white dress” represents Black female sexuality as it has been repressed and mis-represented by Christianity and male patriarchy, beginning with the experience of enslavement and continuing into post-emancipation. Perched precariously on the edge of full-fledged womanhood, this cyclamen girl is a danger to her family honor with her “secrets of sweetness” in the face of the complexities of sexuality in the Caribbean.[60] She must become “a skilled trapezist” as she swings “between/the code of Victoria - /no sex before marriage/no love after/and/the code of mama-/”now you’s a young lady/you can press your hair” (Philip, “TC” lines 10-17). Victoria represents the “learning about sin”, which the Church purity culture teaches, and Mama represents the cultural practices that seek to erase African characteristics such as tightly coiled hair that is often straightened as a mark of entry into womanhood, explicitly rejecting Africa.

(On)Stained Dresses - Towards a Conclusion

Christianity has been the dominant religion for many people in the Caribbean since the coming of missionary colonialism. The legacy of missionary colonialism includes ways of thinking and acting that have been interwoven into the very fabric of Caribbean life and culture.[61] This legacy includes sacralized misogynoir that dictates Afro-Caribbean women’s status in sacred as well as so-called secular spaces. The warped versions of Afro-Caribbean female sexuality engendered are captured and critiqued in the poetry of the three Caribbean women poets: Ferland, Rahim, and Philip. Through presentations of a white dress (and other white accessories) in the sacred sacramental spaces of Church, these women reject the traditional white dress and its meanings imposed on a girl, representing Afro-Caribbean women and girls. The white dress, whether yellowed with age or bridal in newness, is stark against her black skin, highlighting the sinfulness and

---

59 Collier, “At the gates of culture,” 247.

60 Boyce Davies, “Secrets of Sweetness”.

61 Shaw and Escala, “Latin America and the Caribbean”.

impurity put upon her by the missionary colonizer.[62] Each white dress is different – baptismal, First Communion, Confirmation – speaking to the different stages of growth into Christian maturity, changing times, and the perceived innocence (or lack thereof) of the girl. Even as they reflect the constraint of sacred misogynoir, these dresses intervene by calling into question and rejecting negative somatic descriptions.

Ferland, Rahim, and Philip express the potential for the performative body practices and critical perspectives of the Jamaican (and Trinidadian) Roman Catholic women, unveiled by Webster in her research on the "body as temple". In so doing, they reject groundings of misogynoir through sacred acts of body reverence. Such acts of body reverence call women to deploy a bio-politics of sound, speech, and thought which refuses the silencing, belittling, or misrepresenting of the Afro-Caribbean female. In doing so, sacramental spaces can become places of affirmation that push back against taken-for-granted notions of Afro-Caribbean women's inherent sexual sinfulness captured in "the lurking smell of early pregnancy" (Philip, "TC" line 22). It answers the call for the cyclamen girl to "return […]/To her own" (Philip, "Epiphany" lines 9-10).

[62] Seedek, "The African Female Body".

References

Austin-Broos, Diane J. *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Bailey, Nahdjla Carasco. Time for Poetry - A Workshop Approach for CXC. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Boyce Davies, Carole. "Secrets of Sweetness." In *Caribbean Erotic: poetry, prose and essays*, edited by Opal Palmer Adisa and Donna Aza Weir-Soley, 292-301. Leeds: Peepal Press, 2012.

Chevannes, Barry. "Revivalism: A Disappearing Religion." *Caribbean Quarterly* 24, no. 3/4 (Sept.-December 1978): 1-17.

Cieslik, Emma. "Veiling the Female Tabernacle: The Feminist Undertones to Catholic Women Rekindling Traditional Devotional Practice." Blog - *Faith Practices, Feminist Studies in Religion*, December 21, 2021. https://www.fsrinc.org/veiling-the-female-tabernacle-the-feminist-undertones-to-catholic-women-rekindling-traditional-devotional-practice/

Cieslik, Emma. "Mind, Guilty Body, Guilty Soul: (Im)Purity Culture in the American Catholic Church." *The New School*, no date. https://tns-gssi.newschool.org/2022/01/30/guilty-mind-guilty-body-guilty-soul-impurity-culture-in-the-american-catholic-church/

Collier, Gordon. ""At the gate of cultures" of the New World Religion, Mythology, and Folk-Belief in West Indian Poetry." In *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion en Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*, edited by Jamie S. Scott, 227-249. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996.

Creighton, Al. "M NourbeSe Philip: Activism in language." *Stabroek News*, November 1, 2020 https://www.stabroeknews.com/2020/11/01/sunday/arts-on-sunday/m-nourbese-philip-activism-in-language/

DeConick, April. *Holy Misogyny: Why Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter.* Continuum, 2011.

Ferland, Barbara. "Ave Maria*." Caribbean Quarterly* 5. 3, An Anthology of West Indian Poetry (April, 1958), 154. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40652669

Jarvis, Anthea. "The Dress Must Be White, and Perfectly Plain and Simple: Confirmation and First Communion Dress, 1850–2000." *Costume* 41, no. 1 (June 2007): 83-98.

leath, jennifer s., Nontando Hadebe, Nicole Symmonds, and Anna Kasafi Perkins. "Black Feminism, Womanism, and Intersectionality Discourse: A Theo-Ethical Roundtable "intersectionality" as a hallmark of Critical Race Theory." *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 157–175

Lucas, Belén Martín. "Postmodern, postcolonial and feminist: Marlene Nourbese Philip's poems at a theoretical junction." In *La fabrique du genre: (dé)constructions du féminin et du masculin dans les arts et la littérature anglophones* [online]. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008.

Miller, Kei. *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology.* Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2007.

Natarajan, Madison, Kerrie G. Wilkins-Yel, Anushka Sista, Aashika Anantharaman, and Natalie Seils. "Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2022): 316–336.

Perez Montijo, "Edgardo. Eucharistic contradictions: Religious imagery in Marlene Nourbese Philips' "Cyclamen Girl"." *The tower* (Río Piedras) 7, no. 25 (2002): 355-365.

Perkins, Anna Kasafi. "Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women's Health Survey". In *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture,* edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer, 240-267. *Lanham,* MD: Seymour Press, 2019.

Perkins, Anna Kasafi. ""Shi Wi Use Har Blood Tie Him": A Theological Interrogation of Cultural Beliefs about Menstruation and Female [Im]morality in Jamaica". In *Memories of Caribbean Futures:*

reclaiming the precolonial to reimagine a postcolonial languages, literatures and cultures of the Greater Caribbean and beyond, edited by Nicholas Faraclas, et al, 349-359. Puerto Rico/Curacao: University of Curacao, 2017.

Perkins, Anna Kasafi. “More than Words: Evangelicals, the Rhetoric of Battle and the Fight over Gay Rights in the Caribbean,” *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies (Special Issue on Religion in the Caribbean)* 41, no. 1 (April 2016): 13-46.

Perkins, Anna Kasafi. “Mother Hagar’s Daughters will not be Silent: A Prophetic Calling for African American and Caribbean Women?”, In *Sisters of African Descent: Connecting Spirituality, Religion and Vocation,* edited by Lisa Rhodes, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and Meredith Coleman-Tobias, 79-92. Acton, MA: XanEdu Publishers, 2013.

Perkins, Anna Kasafi. “Carne Vale” (Goodbye to flesh)?: Caribbean Carnival, Notions of Flesh and Christian Ambivalence about the Body.” *Sexuality and Culture*, (August 2011): 361-374.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

Rahim, Jennifer. *Approaching Sabbaths: Poems*. Leeds: Peepal Press, 2009.

Rahim, Jennifer. *Ground Level: Poems*. Leeds: Peepal Press, 2014.

Seedek, Abeer Refky. “The African Female Body as a form of Resistance in a Post-Colonialist Context: A Study of Marlene Nourbese Philip’s She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 7, (May 2014): 291-307.

Shaw, Susan and Anuncia Escala. “Latin America and the Caribbean,” in *Women and Religion: Global Lives in Focus (Women and Society around the World)* edited by Susan J. Shaw, 43-76. ABC-CLIO, 2021.

Smith, Mitzi J. *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality and Biblical Interpretation*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018.

Thomas, H. Nigel. “A rejoinder to prospero: an interview with M. Nourbese Philip”. *Kola.* Mar 22, 2008. https://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=180798316

Webster, Carol Marie. “Chat to Mi Back: Meditation on body archive.” *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 11, no. 1 (2019): 49–66.

Webster, Carol Marie. “Body as Temple: Jamaican Catholic Women and the Liturgy

of the Eucharist.” *Journal of Black Theology* 15, no. 1 (2017): 21–40.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2017.1271582

Zimmerman, Mary L. “Vatican II and the Liturgy: Revisiting Lost Traditions*.”* Master of Arts in Liberal Studies thesis, The State University of New Jersey, 2011.

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

Clementine Nishimwe[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Dr Clementine Nishimwe is a lecturer in the Department of Religion Studies. Her research area includes Christianity, gender and migration, African women theologies, and ethnographic theologies. She is also interested in the intersection of faith, peace, and conflict.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
University of Johannesburg
cnishimwe@uj.ac.za

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9257-9037

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/ermwq003

ABSTRACT

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

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

Introduction

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

[1] Interview with Adaugo. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

According to St. Aidan Anglican Church (SAAC) leadership member, Nomthandazo, national diversity plays a significant role in shaping the setting of SAAC, observing that migrants seek to bring their national practices into the church, possibly due to a desire for familiarity and continuity with their home cultures. SAAC comprises migrants from various countries, such as Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Cameroun, Botswana, and Lesotho, alongside South Africans from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Managing diverse communities and perspectives can present challenges. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) points out that any theology must effectively center the narratives, experiences, and spiritualities of marginalized individuals to retain its relevance, transformative capacity, and liberating potential. The Circle was launched in 1989 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye[2] with the intention of amplifying the voices, experiences, and views of African women by means of theologies and praxis.[3] The Circle is a relatively new model of church and society.[4] As Oduyoye puts it, "[t]he injustice that women experience has become the context of their [theologies]".[5] In South Africa, African migrant women are marginalized and their experiences can include harrowing accounts of migration. Adaugo's words, cited above, resonate deeply with the experience of many African migrant women particularly when xenophobic circumstances are tragically normalized in the church.

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

---

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

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

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

[5] Mercy Oduyoye, Introducing African Women's Theology. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 82.

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

Xenophobic sentiments towards migrants[7] in the context of feminized migration[8] can be read as "social death". Drawing on Achille Mbembe's notion of social death, African migrant women are often "divested of political status and reduced to bare life".[9] In numerous instances, migration becomes an involuntary experience, particularly for African migrant women migrating from the southern regions of Africa, that compels many to engage in transnational mothering and care work (along with the inherent challenges)

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

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

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

9 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 12.

as well as other forms of feminized labor inside[10] and outside the household.[11]

How can the church assert its relevance in the era of feminized migration[12] and prevailing xenophobia?[13]

The rise of the Circle can be seen as a call for solidarity with African migrant women through the promotion of healing and wholeness.[14] In a roundtable discussion on women and social justice, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat, and Farah Zeb[15] proposed revisiting religious practices and advocated the embrace of tradition in the crafting of contemporary living forms of religion.

---

10 UN Women, "How Migration is a Gender Equality issue: Migrant Domestic Workers", accessed 14 December 2023, https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/migration/en/index.html#:~:text=Migration%20is%20a%20gendered%20process,as%20domestic%20and%20care%20work. The United Nations (UN) Women report on gender equity and migration notes that at least 74% of female migrants are engaged in domestic work compared to 26% of male migrants. Moreover, approximately 40% of countries worldwide lack labor laws that specifically protect and cover the rights and working conditions of domestic workers. Most migrant women tend to remain confined to their workplace, which, in turn, renders them more vulnerable to labor and human rights abuses. Additionally, many migrant women find themselves in street vending, selling goods or services in public spaces such as the streets, sidewalks, or open markets. People who are street vending often lack access to labor protections and can be exposed to various forms of abuse, including labor rights violations, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as racism and xenophobia.

11 Kezia Batisai, "Retheorising Migration: A South-South Perspective", in Migration in Southern Africa IMISCOE Regional Reader, eds. Pragna Rugunanan Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, (Switzerland: Springer, 2022),16.

12 Lungile Prudence Zondi and Nolwazi Magwaza, "Women Taking Agency through Feminized Migration Patterns and Remittances: Socio-Economic Experiences of Migrant Street Vendors, Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal-South Africa." Advances in Anthropology 13, no. 1 (2023): 30. 29–40.

13 Misago Jean Pierre and Loren Landau, "'Running Them Out of Time:'Xenophobia, Violence, and Co-Authoring Spatiotemporal Exclusion in South Africa", Geopolitics 28, no. 4 (2023): 1611-1631.

14 See Haddad Beverly, "Reframing women's agency in #Blessed sex: Intersectional dilemmas for African women's theologies," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 77, no.2 (2022): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6603.

15 Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat and Farah Zeb, "Roundtable Discussion from the Annual Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice Public Lecture on Economies of Violence", The African Journal of Gender and Religion 27, no. 2 (2021): 98.

Echoing Brigalia Bam's proposal, the Circle offers an alternative blueprint for the church[16] that recalls and recommits the common union that is central to the Eucharist. Brigalia's insights guide this article whereby adopting the Circle's theologizing methodologies the article offers an alternative approach to practicing church in the context of feminized migration and xenophobia, opening possibilities for a more relevant and empowering church.

David Kirwa Tarus's writings on the Circle's theologizing methodologies[17] highlight the significance of African migrant women's stories. Tarus's work centers the narrative, perspectival, plural (the multicultural, multi-religious, multi-racial), communal, and feminist approaches.

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

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

---

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

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

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

19 Ibid.

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

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

Ethnography: Collecting the narratives of African migrant women

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Circle’s methodology for theologizing

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

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

23 Bryman, Social research methods, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67.
24 Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology, 17.
25 Tarus, “Social Transformation in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” 4.

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Narratives, diversity, and perspectives - African migrant women

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

---

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

34 Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology, 16.

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

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

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

Feminized employment/double socialization

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

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

Scholars[41] have recorded similar experiences among migrant women and these experiences echo their work ethic of survival.[42] Chiedza worked as a

---

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

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

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

40 Interview. 2017.10.29. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

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

child-minder in a Zimbabwean household, where she described earning R2000[43] despite shouldering all the household chores and working long hours six days a week. The mother of the children, who worked at a bank, also experienced constant stress due to the demands of her job. This scenario reflects a common experience for many employees, particularly women with children. According to Anna Amelina and Helma Lutz, this stress can be attributed to the double socialization of women whereby they are expected to fulfil simultaneous roles as caregivers at home and breadwinners in the workforce. Consequently, these women often continue in paid employment while hiring others to take on the domestic responsibilities.[44] This double socialization reinforces the "asymmetry of doing gender", creating a context in this research that poses potential life-threatening risks to African migrant women who undertake all household chores for a monthly salary of R2000. Additionally, Chiedza's stressful and underpaid employment situation negatively impacts her ability to make critical decisions in the management of her diabetic condition. During fieldwork, Chiedza was hospitalized due to complication with diabetes. Tragically, she passed away shortly after my fieldwork concluded.

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[45] Interview. 2017.10.15. Johannesburg, South Africa.
[46] Anna, and Lutz, "Gender and migration: Transnational and intersectional prospects", 4.
[47] Interview. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

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

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

[48] Interview. 2017.10.15. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

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

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

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

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

49 Oduyoye, Introducing African women's theology, 17.
50 Interview. 2018.04.20. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

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

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

---

[51] Interview. 2019.03.13. Johannesburg, South Africa.

[52] See Madipoane Masenya, "For Better or for Worse?" - the (Christian) Bible and Africana Women", OTE 22, No.1 (2009): 126.

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

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

Individualized experiences of God

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

[56] Interview. 2017.10.13. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

Wim addresses these experiences and proposes that being a Christian should inherently be a communal rather than a private matter.[58] This understanding is supported by Oduyoye's advocacy for Christian anthropology[59] that actively listens to the voices of the afflicted, promoting life-enhancing relationships.[60] Similarly, the Circle's ecclesiology emphasizes the importance of modelling the household of God within the community.[61]

Conclusion: Being a contextually relevant church

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

57 Interview. 2018.01.10. Johannesburg, South Africa.

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

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

60 Oduyoye, Introducing African Women Theology, 48.

61 Oduyoye, Hearing and Knowing, 124–125.

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

[68] Ibid, 23.

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

72 Christou and Kofman, “Gender and Migration,” 98.

73 See Dube, “Translating Cultures,” 4.

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

78 Interview. 2017.10.22. Johannesburg, South Africa.

References

Ackermann, Denise. "Living with difference and otherness: A response to the stories from Canada, Spain and Italy." *Regreso y Encuentro–Reflexiones teológica* (2006): 1–10.

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

Ayanga, Hazel O. "Voice of the voiceless: The legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no.2 (2016): 1–6.

Batisai, Kezia. "Retheorising Migration: A South-South Perspective". In *Migration in Southern Africa IMISCOE Regional Reader,* edited by Pragna Rugunanan and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, (Springer, 2022), 11–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92114-9_2

Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Christou, Anastasia, and Eleonore Kofman. *Gender and Migration: An Introduction: IMISCOE Short Reader*, SpringerCham, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91971-9

Connell, F. Martin. "The Gift of Myrrh to a Church that Smells," *Studia liturgica* 37, no. 2 (2007): 217–233.

Dreyer, Wim. "The real crisis of the church." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1–5.

Dube, Musa. "HIV and AIDS research and writing in the circle of African women theologians 2002–2006." *Compassionate circles: African women theologians facing HIV* (2009): 173–196.

Dube, Musa. "Circle Readings of the Bible/Scriptoratures." In *Study of Religion in Southern Africa Essays in Honour of G.C.Oosthuizen,* edited by Smit, Johannes, and Pratap Kumar, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 77–96

Dube, Musa. "Introduction: 'Little Girl, Get Up!"' In *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, edited by Nyambula Njoroge and Musa Dube, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 1–24.

Dube, Musa. "Translating Cultures: The Creation of Sin in the Public Space of Batswana," *Scriptura* 114, no.1 (2015): 1–11.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," in *Her Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, edited by. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar. (South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2002), 19–42.

Machinya, Johannes. ""We maZimba… There Is Nothing That We Cannot Do": The Work Ethic of Undocumented Zimbabwean Day Labourers in eMalahleni, South Africa." In *Migration in Southern Africa IMISCOE Regional Reader,* edited by Pragna Rugunanan and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama*,* (Springer, 2022), 231–245, https://doi.org/10.1007/978–3-030–92114–9.

Masenya, Madipoane. ""For Better or for Worse?" - the (Christian) Bible and Africana Women." *OTE* 22, No.1 (2009): 126–150.

Maymon Paulina, Lucio. "The Feminization of Migration: Why are Women Moving More? Cornell Policy Review," accessed 10 December 2022, http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/the-feminization-of-migration-why-are-women-moving-more/.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." In *Foucault in an Age of Terror: Essays on Biopolitics and the Defence of Society*, edited by Morton, Stephen, and Stephen Bygrave, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 153–183.

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

Misago, Jean Pierre and Loren B., Landau. "'Running Them Out of Time:'Xenophobia, Violence, and Co-Authoring Spatiotemporal Exclusion in South Africa." *Geopolitics* 28, no. 4 (2023): 1611–1631.

Mombo, Esther. “Considerations for an Inclusive Global Theological Education.” *Ecumenical Review* 71, no.4 (2019): 449–60.

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

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

Nadar, Sarojini. "“Stories are data with Soul”-lessons from black feminist epistemology.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 28, no.1 (2014), 18–28

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

Nyambura, Njoroge. "The missing voice: African women doing theology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 77–83.

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

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. “The Search for a Two-Winged Theology: Women’s Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa: The Inaugural Address.” In *Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*, edited by Oduyoye Amba Mercy and Musimbi Kanyoro, (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1990), 27–48.

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

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

Parkin, David and Karel Arnaut. "Super-diversity & Sociolinguistics–a digest," *Tilburg Papers in Cultural Studies* 95 (2014): 1–6.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. "Major challenges for African women theologians in theological education (1989-2008)." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 34, no.2 (2008): 1–19.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. "Contextual Theologies of Southern Africa." In *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, edited by John Parratt, 137–162, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

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

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

Ruzungunde, Vongai and Sindiso Zhou. "Attitudes towards migrant workers in South Africa: A critical discourse analysis." *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 2 (2021):1–9.

Sa'diyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat, and Farah Zeb. "Roundtable Discussion from the Annual Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice Public Lecture on Economies of Violence." *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27, no. 2 (2021): 92–123.

Saldanha, Colette and Elina Hankela. "An Emerging Framework of Inclusion: Listening to the Voices of Non-Ordained Anglican Women." *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 28, no 1 (2022): 1–24. **https://doi.org/10.36615/ajgr.v28i1.1723**

Shilling, Chris and Philip A. Mellor. "Cultures of Embodied Experience: Technology, Religion and Body Pedagogics," *The Sociological Review* 55, no.3 (2007): 531–549.

Tarus,_David Kirwa. "Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 33, no.1 (2018): 1–22.

UN Women. "How Migration is a Gender Equality issue: Migrant Domestic Workers," last modified December 2023, https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/migration/en/in

dex.html#:~:text=Migration%20is%20a%20gendered%20process,as%20domestic%20and%20care%20work.

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

Zondi, Lungile Prudence and Nolwazi Magwaza. "Women Taking Agency through Feminized Migration Patterns and Remittances: Socio-Economic Experiences of Migrant Street Vendors, Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal-South Africa." *Advances in Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (2023): 29–40.

Nation Women Negotiating Islam: Moving Beyond Boundaries in the Twentieth Century by C. S'thembile West

Reviewer: Raedorah C. Stewart[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]The Reverend Dr Raedorah C. Stewart is the Faculty Director of the Writing Center and Adjunct Faculty at Wesley Theological Seminary, and Associate Minister at Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ in Washington, DC.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Wesley Theological Seminary, USA
raedorah.stewart@gmail.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0047-4076

SUBMISSION DATE
31 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
23 May 2024

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/0anp5403

Overview

C. S'thembile West's monograph, "Nation Women Negotiating Islam: Moving Beyond Boundaries in the Twentieth Century", navigates the complex interplay between African American women and the Nation of Islam (NOI) throughout the 20th century. West tackles universal gender themes. such as women's submission in the roles of marriage and family, education, and community activism, and those within the particular confines and freedoms afforded by the NOI's explicit and implicit teachings. Through a methodological combination of ethnographic, historical, phenomenological, analytical, and autobiographical approaches, West presents a nuanced exploration of the negotiation and redefinition of boundaries by Nation Women.

Key Themes

After a detailed scaffolding of NOI historiography in the Introduction, the work adeptly addresses several pivotal areas. These include the often-polarizing dynamics of defining submissiveness and imposing submission

© Author(s) CC BY NC
ISSN 2707-2991

within Islamic contexts, specifically how it pertains to the lived experiences of African American Muslim women, and by association, girls. Marriage and family, education, community activism, and the politics of protection emerge as central spheres where Nation Women seek to balance traditional gendered expectations with modern aspirations, challenges, and realities. This balancing act highlights a vibrant dialogue between individual agency and collective identity within the NOI, offering fresh insights into the multifaceted nature of community adherence and gender dynamics.

Critical Analysis

West's methodology is notably effective, employing a rich tapestry of narrative approaches that allow for a depth of insight and broad thematic coverage. As a researcher-participant, the ethnographic element of the research provides an intimate glimpse into the everyday lives of women within the NOI, enriched further by historical and phenomenological layers that situate these experiences within wider societal and doctrinal contexts. Reflective, personal, and autobiographical faculties engage the reader on a profoundly human level, bridging scholarly analysis with personal stories from West's her girlhood and scholarly reflections that underline the vibrancy and complexity of Nation Women's lives.

While methodological richness is a strength, it may pose analytical challenges, chiefly in maintaining a consistent critical distance. The intertwining of personal narratives with academic critique occasionally blurs the lines between subjective experience and objective analysis, not unusual for any researcher-participant. However, this does not serve as duplicity, but rather as an innovative means of engaging with the material, compelling the reader to appreciate the intersectionality of identity, spirituality, and sociopolitical dynamics. Doing so bridges the chasm between audiences. Indeed, scholar-to-pew women can relate and embrace this affirmation of agency and amplification of self-determination amidst the decidedly patriarchal milieu of the NOI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Nation Women Negotiating Islam: Moving Beyond Boundaries in the Twentieth Century" is a seminal work that contributes significantly to non-NOI women's understanding of the intersections between race, gender, activism, and a lesser emphasis on a woman's

Islamic religious identity in America. A prevalent conversation among non-NOI women, churchwomen, and womanist scholars is centered around how Muslim women show up physically in the world—modest dress, quiet, and submissive in proximity to men in public. There is little to no distinction between NOI women and the religious Islamic Shiite/Suni women. West's book exacts NOI intersectionality that, at times, does not adhere to the visual markers of Islamic religious women. Her comprehensive and empathetic approach sheds light on the specific realities of African American Muslim women. It contributes to broader conversations about religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and womanist scholarship among NOI and women of other faith traditions.

My ultimate takeaway is that this work becomes a universal motif of liberating women into owning our social locations without assuming patriarchal affirmations as the explicit and implicit markers of significance in community, culture, and faith tradition. Contributions of Black women across the compendium of social justice, liberation, and religious movements are minimized or omitted from typical historical narratives, i.e., Civil Rights Movements, Black Panthers, inventions and patents, and OT and NT biblical canon. This monograph does not subvert to centering the male gaze to affirm a woman's work or worth. This is even more important than positing egalitarianism since the trajectory of this work is woman-centric and offers no apology for staying the course.

Given my background as a clergywoman and seminary professor in African American Christian Protestant contexts, womanist scholarship, and interfaith dialogue, West's exploration resonates with broader themes of religious negotiation and rhetorical construction of identity that transcend any single faith tradition. This work is an invaluable resource for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in the nuanced ways in which religious, racial, and gender identities converge and diverge within complex sociopolitical landscapes. I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the diverse experiences and voices of Muslim women in America and the Diaspora. It is a powerful testament to the agency, resilience, and complexity of these women as they navigate their identities and negotiate their place in society. As we continue to work towards greater inclusivity and understanding across differences, "Nation Women Negotiating Islam" serves as a reminder of the power and potential of intersectional identities in shaping our world.

Nation Women Negotiating Islam: Moving Beyond Boundaries in the Twentieth Century by C. S'thembile West

"Nation Women Negotiating Islam" is a powerful and necessary addition to the literature on Muslim women, and I highly recommend it to NOI women and girls, scholars, students, and general readers alike.

Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus by Kenneth N. Ngwa

Reviewer: NaShieka Knight[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]NaShieka Knight is a PhD student in Biblical Interpretation - Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Ft. Worth, TX. Her dissertation focuses on defining African identity in the exodus narrative. Her research interests include Africa and Africanisms in the Hebrew Bible, feminist and womanist interpretations, and African and African American biblical hermeneutics.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Brite Divinity School, Fort. Worth, Texas, USA
n.d.knight@tcu.edu

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3797-2925

SUBMISSION DATE
11 July 2023

ACCEPTANCE DATE
24 July 2023

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/fn7smy45

In *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*, Kenneth Ngwa places the experience of the ancient Israelite community in conversation with the concerns and experiences of contemporary Africana peoples. He correlates the Exodus community's struggle for survival with the challenges faced and opportunities awaiting Africana peoples in their global struggles for liberation and thriving.

Ngwa defines Africana as referring to intersecting epistemologies, theories, and praxis of communal meaning-making and identity formation by persons of African descent across time and space. He constructs an overarching theoretical framework that accesses multiple Afro-diasporic interlocutions and synthesizes them beyond geographic and ideologic borders. These multiple interlocutions coalesce under a hermeneutic umbrella that resists restriction to one methodology. Instead, he deploys narrative, postcolonial, and ideological hermeneutics to explore the Exodus as both a Biblical story and a literary and liberation motif. In this monograph, Ngwa demonstrates the breadth and depth of Africana hermeneutics, engaging with Afro-

© Author(s) CC BY NC
ISSN 2707-2991

diasporic interlocutors and issues of importance to Africana history, contemporary experiences, and future possibilities.

In the first chapter, "Tears of Redesign: Birthing Exodus and Badass Womanism," Ngwa engages with the scholarship of womanist theologians and biblical scholars, harnessing the bold question-raising and creative meaning-making that Africana women engender to advocate for the recovery and creation of communal identities. His conversation partners in this chapter include noted Biblical and non-biblical writers like Alice Walker, Delores Williams, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Musa Dube, and Madipoane Masenya. Ngwa transgresses gender norms by engaging women scholars and practitioners as primary thought partners throughout the book. He also demonstrates that one does not need to self-identify as a woman to practice womanist biblical interpretation.

In the second chapter, Ngwa identifies three material locations in the Exodus: Egypt, the wilderness, and the Mountain. He argues that each location possesses its own ideological character and, in some ways, each contributed to the triple threat confronting the Israelites, which he describes as erasure, alienation, and singularization. He correlates these triple threats, or triple traumas, with the slave ship, the slave castle, and the postcolony, all significant physical and ideological contexts in Africana history.

In chapter three, Ngwa reads Exodus 2 in dialogue with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* resulting in the development of, what he names, the Gershomite-ogbanje concept. He defines Gershomite-ogbanje as "a mode of postcolonial identity and hermeneutics that depicts the fragility of life in the colonial space and the capacity to survive…to survive in and as a communal body".[1]

In the fourth chapter, Ngwa makes a significant analytical move by naming the land as a central character in the Exodus story. He leverages the work of Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the "changing material and ecological resources of African-descended communities and epistemologies . . . in order to make

[1] Kenneth N. Ngwa, *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 84.

interpretation accountable and liberative".[2] This framing invites Africana readers to grapple with our complex and multivalent relationships with land, continental and diasporic, holding in tension *theft of* land with *theft from* land and cultivation of land with destruction of land. When applied to the Exodus story, this prevents the reader from glossing over the narrative destruction of ecological Egypt during the Exodus and the ideological justification of such destruction in biblical scholarship.

Consistent with chapter four's focus on earth and land, chapter five centers Miriam as a mechanism for exegeting the Exodus' water motif. Miriam is the older sister of Exodus' central character, Moses. When a genocide was exacted on all Hebrew babies, Moses' mother hid him in a basket on the Nile River, and he was drawn from the river by the Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam, who was watching in the distance to see what would happen to her brother, approached and offered to find a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women to assist with the infant's care. In her cunning, quick wit, and unbeknownst to the Pharaoh's daughter, she arranged for her mother to accompany Moses to the palace and serve as his nurse and caregiver. Miriam resurfaced later in Exodus as an outspoken prophet.[3] For Ngwa, Miriam embodies "resistance to necroecology-ecological death".[4] Through her participation in Moses' rescue from the waters of the Nile, her critique of Moses' decision making and subsequent punishment, leading the community in song at the sea crossing, and ultimately her death at Kadesh, Ngwa posits that Miriam represents the "eco-political transformation of alienation, the transformation of erasure, and the manifestation of communal identity".[5]

In the final chapter, Ngwa parallels Israel's experience at the Mountain with the post-liberation call to confront the vestiges of oppression and to reimagine empire. Through an African (Cameroonian) postcolonial lens, he reminds emancipated communities that structures of empire must not just be escaped, they must also be deconstructed, dismantled, or, at minimum,

---

2 Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 22. See also Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2003).
3 For more on Miriam as a prophet, see Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
4 Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 139.
5 Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 153.

transformed. He cautions that this work is often ongoing and is the culmination of liberation. For Ngwa, liberation is incomplete unless it is accompanied by redesign.

Let my People Live offers a transgressive and redemptive reading of the Exodus that invites Africana readers to move beyond suffering and oppression in the narrative and to harness that suffering to envision a liberated future. An element of that liberated future entails defining and redefining individual and collective identity. In that vein, Ngwa posits Joseph and Moses as sites of identity formation. In setting the context for the Israelite-Egyptian entanglement, he writes,

> [t]he first narrative lacuna, the first release of communal tears, in this storied journey is that the oppressive Pharaoh did not know Joseph . . . Pharaoh's epistemological amnesia . . . is corrosive to the communal and interpretive existence of the Hebrews.[6]

Ngwa’s exegesis of Joseph’s experience in Egypt is an invitation to interrogate the relationship between the natural forgetting that happens over time, forced memory loss or erasure, failure to intentionally remember, and the development and sustainability of communal identities. Ngwa lays this foundation to build upon it a hermeneutic of liberation. However, as a reader whose ancestors were forcefully separated from their land, language, and community in ways that suppressed and erased embedded and embodied memory, this illuminates the dual dilemma of living under a system that has forgotten you while grappling with your community’s collective forgetting.

For Ngwa, Joseph’s narrative, on the one hand, foreshadows the threat facing all of Israel: the threat of erasure. On the other hand, he describes Moses as an endangered and displaced Hebrew-Egyptian, a refugee who was once an endangered, exposed, and adopted child. Lifting Moses' own self-definition of alienness from Exodus 2:22, Ngwa sees Moses' words as an interpretive trope for his entire diasporic community, that they are neither *this* nor *that*. Instead, they are somewhere in between. Rhetorically, he proffers that this trope gets mapped onto the national story: "Israel

---

[6] Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 37

endangered in Egypt, alienated in the wilderness, and adopted in the mountain area".[7]

Ngwa demonstrates the complex relationship between land/location and identity. As he traces Israel's movement, or migration, from Egypt through the wilderness to the mountain, he chronicles the formation of the community's identity. He argues that the Hebrew identity developed in response to attempted erasure and that it was shaped by migration. Since this migration began in Africa, this diasporic Hebrew community should be understood as an African diaspora. This theory raises new interpretive questions such as: are there any similarities between this ancient African diasporic community and contemporary African diasporas; and what would be the impact on Ancient Israel's history if the Exodus community's experiences were read as the experiences of an African diaspora?

Let My People Live offers the field of biblical studies a concrete example of exegetically sound cultural hermeneutics. Ngwa fuses Africana interpretation with womanist interpretation, enabling Bible readers in the African diaspora to see their interests and issues centered in Biblical interpretation. He engages Africana history, literature, art, and figures as interpretive companions, creating new approaches to the Exodus story. Moreover, Ngwa's book debunks the myth that womanist interpretation can only be deployed by those whose embodiment is black and woman. He does this by amplifying women's voices and other marginalized Biblical characters, centering black women's issues and concerns and engaging black women's voices as interlocutors; all central tenants of womanist biblical interpretation. Ngwa's book would be a value-adding text to any Africana, postcolonial, liberation, or womanist biblical interpretation focused course.

[7] Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 84

References

Gafney, Wilda C. *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Maathai, Wangari. *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. New York: Lantern Books, 2003.

Ngwa, Kenneth. *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022.