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(15) GENDER AND THE BIBLE IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Musa W. Dube

Introduction

Gender is a crucial social category that organizes relationships and distributes power among individuals, within institutions and in all social relationships. Gender, more often than not, determines who has power to make decisions and to implement them; who has the right to speak and be heard; who has the right to own property and manage it; and who has the right to contest and hold public positions of leadership. Because most studies on gender argue that gender constructions do not distribute power equitably among females and males, all justice-seeking, peace-loving, empowerment-dreaming, salvation-preaching, deliverance-making and government-planning departments in society need to understand how gender is produced and maintained as well as how it affects the members of every community. They need to highlight gender in the implementation of their policies and programmes as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of the same. Without factoring in gender, their visions, goals and objectives will only be partially realized, if not downright frustrated. African Christianity, a vibrant institution that houses millions of females and males, preaches salvation, redemption, healing, deliverance and empowerment for its members. Unless African Christianity fully investigates how gender affects its members and the structures of the African Church, then its core business of salvation, redemption, healing and deliverance from negative powers will not be realized by all its members. It is imperative for gender-justice to be central to the message, programmes and institutions of African churches for African Christianity to deliver liberating salvation to its members and the communities they serve.

Gender is described as a ‘set of behavioural, cultural, psychological and social characteristics and practices associated with masculinity and femininity’.¹ Mary Ann Tolbert asserts that ‘Gender is constructed, and constructed differently, in diverse local settings’.² The latter definition argues that gender is not a natural trait or a divinely-given position; rather, it is a social construct. As a social construct, gender is neither permanent nor unchangeable nor uniform. Since it is a construct, every society tends to construct its members differently according to other social categories such as class, race, age, sexuality and religion, among others. This means that females and males of lower class are expected to assume different ways of behaviour, different dress, different ways of eating and attitudes to work, than those of higher class within the same society. Similarly females and males of one religion are expected to dress differently from those of another. Fashions of the younger generation and senior citizens also differ. People of other sexual orientation often find themselves forced to perform prescribed gender roles that are inconsistent with their sexual identity. I could elaborate on these differences with various social categories, but the point is made – namely, that gender is a time and culture-specific construction that is dependent on or linked with other various social categories such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion. This definition makes gender ‘a fluid and shifting’ category, for females and males of the same society and country will be constructed differently.

It follows that a paper on gender and the Bible in African Christianity can give only broad highlights on phenomena that can be described in a million different ways in the whole continent, given the diversities of religion, ethnicity, race, sexuality, age and class in each country and how they construct social roles for

¹ See Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 198.

² Mary Ann Tolbert, “Gender,” 99-105, in A.K.M. Adam, ed. *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*. St Louise: Chalice Press, 2000, 101.

their members. In her book, *Africa: Reinventing Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, Ifi Amadiume³ presents fieldwork-based research which shows that in most African cultures gender was not constructed as a set of binary oppositions that automatically excluded women from the public sphere and positions of power. In fact, such indigenous public economic arenas as the market-place were, in some regions, traditionally constructed as an exclusively female area, where males could have access only through female agents.⁴ While Amadiume does not claim that African societies were egalitarian, she argues that gender construction was 'not monolithically masculine, that is, consisting of male symbols and masculine principles and values', but rather 'the structure of father is not as autonomous as that of mother'.⁵ Amadiume argues that most, if not all, African societies have 'matriarchal roots or structures' which shape traditional ways of gender construction.⁶

Further, a paper on gender, Bible and African Christianity highlights new cultural constructions that produce other complex categories of gender for three different reasons. First, the Bible is a Jewish book that models different gender constructions, according to their cultural, religious and economic understanding. Second, the Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written or compiled over two millennia, thus presenting conflicting gender constructions. Third, African Christianity, especially sub-Saharan, is not uniform but a product of the collision of modern European Christianities, brought by different denominations (e.g. Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist). The European countries brought Christianity to sub-Saharan Africa in a colonial context (laden with their own cultures) and planted it in different indigenous African cultures. In the memories of African people, the Bible is thus tied up with colonial history, as attested by the popular oral story that holds that 'when the white man came to our land, he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said, Let us pray. But the time we had finished praying, the white man had our land and we had the Bible'.⁷ The Bible is linked with land and dispossession, but is now claimed as a possession received through western colonialism. The Bible is thus described as another set of wisdom, which co-exists with pre-existing collections of African oral wisdom.⁸ We do not, in other words, have one African Christianity, but several African Christianities.

This introductory background informs three 'windows' on Gender, Bible and African Christianity elaborated in this paper. The windows are not definitive or uniform for all forms of African Christianity, given the complexity of gender constructions, the diversity of biblical books and their gender constructions, or the diversity of African Christianities and their gender constructions, at different times and places. The three windows presented here are best seen as invitations to a million research projects that are time- and place-specific in the diverse contexts of the African continent. They are explored under the following sub-headings:

Gender and the Enculturation Bible in African Christianity

Gender and Translation of African Bibles

Gender and the Pentecostal African Bible

Before I briefly sketch the above windows, it is appropriate to give some brief background to Bible and gender and the institution of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

³ Ifi Amadiume, *Africa: Reinventing Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London: Zed Books, 1997.

⁴ See Ifi Amadiume. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. London: Zed Books, 139-142.

⁵ Amadiume, *Africa*, 36-37.

⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁷ Its oral circulation means that the text often appears in various versions.

⁸ See Mercy A. Oduyoye., *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004, 18-34.

The Bible and Gender

The Christian Bible is a collection of sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Hebrew Bible and twenty-seven in the New Testament. These books can be categorized into seven literary families – namely, 1. Books of the law, 2. Historical books, 3. Wisdom books, 4. Prophetic books, 5. Gospels, 6. Epistles, and 7. Apocalyptic literature. Some also have apocryphal books such as Tobit, Judith, I and II Maccabees, etc. Historical studies estimate that biblical literature was produced and evolved over a period of two millennia. Consequently, identifying authors, places of authorship and original manuscripts is generally complex and defies accuracy in most books except for a few such as the authentic letters of the apostle Paul. Narrative approach to biblical studies, however, argues that understanding the message of a story does not necessarily require historical facts, such as knowledge of the author, date and place of production, but just a complete manuscript.⁹

Studies on gender and the Bible can best be traced to Elisabeth Cady Stanton, a white suffragette, who was perturbed by the use of the Bible to exclude women from empowerment and human rights, such as voting. Her experience led her to a fundamental insight and conclusion – namely, that ‘the Bible is a male book’.¹⁰ This statement means that Cady Stanton realized that biblical texts tend to be used to support the interests of males and the subordination of females. Cady Stanton sought to produce *The Women’s Bible* that would serve to empower women rather than to disadvantage them. While her project was frustrated by a lack of women trained in biblical studies and languages, in the 1960s more women began to enter biblical studies and to investigate gender construction in the Bible and its impact on biblically-based institutions, cultures, relationships and structures.¹¹ Their insights remained consistent with Cady Stanton – namely, that the Bible is a male book, which largely constructs cultures, social institutions and females and males who exist in the realm of its influence, from a male-centred worldview. Using various methods and theories, feminist studies sought to interrogate how gender is biblically constructed to support male interests; why and how women have allowed themselves to internalize and accept biblical perspectives that disadvantage them; and sought numerous ways to re-read the texts for empowerment of both genders.¹² Consistent with the above definition of gender as a social construction linked with various other social categories, biblical studies’ analysis of biblical texts by contemporary feminists expose how class, race, sexuality, age, religion and ethnicity interpret and affect the construction of females and males in their particular communities.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

In the African continent, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth, the Circle) provides an important forum for the study of the Bible and Gender in African Christianities. The Circle is a pan-African multi-religious academic association, which seeks to research and write on how religions affect the lives of women. It also seeks to find and mentor young women who are interested in studying religious tradition. The Circle was founded by Mercy Oduyoye in 1989, after realizing that religious traditions are often used to legitimise the exclusion and disempowerment of women, and that their

⁹ See Elisabeth Struthers Malbon, “How does the Story Mean?” pp. 29-58. In S. D. Moore and J. Anderson, eds. in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

¹⁰ See Ann Loades, “Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Women’s Bible*,” pp. 307-322. In Michal Lieb, E. Mason and J. Roberts, eds. *Jesus the Light of the World: The Oxford Handbook of Reception History of the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹¹ See Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds. *The Women’s Bible Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster, 1992.

¹² See Janice Capel Anderson, “The Dancing Daughter,” 111-144. In J.C. Anderson and S.D. Moore, eds. *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008, for a good summary on feminist biblical scholars at work.

interpretations are often dominated by males.¹³ By seeking to create an opportunity for African women's voices to be heard, she sought for 'an African theology that flies with two wings'. The Circle currently has a continent-wide membership of about five hundred women and has produced at least a hundred books. It is structured according to regional and national chapters, which are free to identify topics and themes of study that are relevant in their particular contexts.

In its beginning, the Circle had only one biblical scholar, Teresa Okure from Nigeria. Since then, the Circle has at least sixteen African women scholars of the Bible. Within the Circle, various volumes have been produced that investigate gender constructions in the Bible from the perspectives and experiences of African women. These include: *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* and *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, along with numerous chapters published within other volumes of the Circle, such as *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women*, *Her Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, among others, and in scholarly works outside the Circle, such as *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*. Female African biblical scholars have also produced independent monographs and edited several volumes that explore gender in African Christianity. Good examples here include Musimbi Kanyoro and Madipoane Masenya's work.¹⁴ Altogether, these volumes are crucial in providing us with sketches of gender and the Bible in African Christianity that are listed above.

Gender and the Enculturated African Bible

The Bible was received within African cultural beliefs. Sub-Saharan Christianity was thus planted in and nurtured by African oral cultural beliefs. African cultural beliefs are largely oral and diverse. Generally, they underline communal relationships. One thinks here of John Mbiti's popularized saying, 'I am because we are, and we are because I am', and the Bantu saying, *Umuntungumuntungabantu* ('a human being is only human through other human beings') to emphasise communitarian African cultures. A deeper interrogation of this communal philosophy should make no room for gender or social oppression of any kind. Indeed, it should be integral to the promotion of gender equality and liberation in general, for unless all members are respected and equally empowered, then we cannot be community. The communal African perspective is also underlined through the belief in Ancestors, who are regarded as the living dead, who continue to show interest in their surviving relatives and to intercede for them before the Divine Being (God). The Ancestors play a significant role in sustaining healthy relationships among the living, since negligence in maintaining healthy relationships is believed to result in ill health, misfortune and lack of prosperity. This is because Ancestors do not intercede for irresponsible members of the family and community. In African thinking, ill health is, therefore, first sought in one's relationships with family, the larger community and the living dead, which must be healed before medicine is administered for physical pain.

Ancestor veneration includes maintaining healthy relationships with the Earth.¹⁵ The Earth houses both the living and the living dead, and should be kept sacred in African cultural thinking.¹⁶ Ploughing seasons are often preceded by rituals of thanksgiving and cleansing the land of any pollution, such as the murder of human beings, unburied human bodies, aborted children, and violent crimes – for all these are held to

¹³ See Musimbi Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle," pp.15-38. In Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar eds. *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002.

¹⁴ See Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: African Perspective*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002 and Madipoane Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth: Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African South Africa*. New York: Peter Land, 2004.

¹⁵ Earth is capitalized to underline that Earth is the proto-citizen within the whole Earth community.

¹⁶ See Laurenti Magesa, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*. New York: Orbis Press, 2013.

desecrate the land. The occurrence of natural disasters, such as drought, initiates a communal introspection about how human beings relate to nature and hold themselves responsible for upsetting its natural balance. Some of these perspectives can be scientifically proven to be lacking, but it cannot be disputed that human beings need to constantly evaluate how they relate to the Earth and how they negatively affect its balance. According to George Kinoti, 'Three factors in particular are harming God's creation: rapid population growth... increase in the consumption of resources... and use of polluting technologies'. These lead to the over-use of land, water pollution, climate change, loss of forests, plant and animal species, the Earth's shield, and pollution by chemicals.¹⁷ In short, the African cultural worldview consists of the living, the living dead (Ancestors), the Earth and the highest Deity, God.¹⁸ In this cosmology, the living and the living dead consist of both females and males. The Earth is largely regarded as female and the Divine Being is not gendered. The most crucial aspect in this cosmology is the need to maintain healthy relationships. Failure to maintain healthy relationships constitute 'sin' that requires rituals of healing and reconciliation. There was no concept of an inherently evil human being that needed a saviour in the sub-Saharan Africa cultural worldview.

The arrival of Christianity was thus planted in a pre-existing belief system. Although colonial Christianity attempted to erase African cultures by characterizing them as uncivilized, superstitious and outright evil,¹⁹ it is not possible to erase a culture simply by introducing a new one. What results in such scenarios is the mixing of cultures: the reshaping of the incoming and the pre-existing cultures into new, hybrid identities. Planted in the cultural soil of Africa, Christianity was fed and fertilized by African cultures, but its seed would also begin to reconstitute African cultures, especially in the way that gender relations were constructed. African theological scholars have described this phenomenon of the inter-fertilization of Christianity and African cultures as 'enculturation'. According to Edward Antonio, 'enculturation can be thought of as an attempt to resolve the problem of cultural and religious "inconsumerability" entailed by the colonial insistence on the radical difference between civilized western cultures and their "irrational" African counterparts'.²⁰ Antonio explores the various frameworks used to construct enculturation hermeneutics and theology, pointing out that 'enculturation proceeds by making use of the cognate ideas of comparison, continuity, resemblance, similitude and synthesis'.²¹ How did this new introduction and the cross-fertilization reconstitute gender?²² I want to use the case study of Christology in the African enculturation project. This is primarily because Christianity did not introduce the concept of God to sub-Saharan Africans since they already knew God (even so, we will examine the reconstruction of God further on in this article, under translation). The concept of Christ and the biblical scriptures were the new aspects.

First, the male figure of Christ *as the one and only* intermediary to God was bound to be a major cultural shaker (emphasis mine). Jesus was no doubt a historical figure, a Jewish male, the son of Mary and Joseph, the son of David and the Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1-2); Jesus is depicted as male, even in his spiritual status. For example, at birth, it is said, 'He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High' (Luke 1:31-32). At baptism, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17). His coming to the world is described as God giving his beloved son (John

¹⁷ George Kinoti, "Christians and the Environment," in Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006, 616.

¹⁸ In some West African cultures their cosmology includes gods that are higher than Ancestors.

¹⁹ See Edward P. Antonio, *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006, 36.

²⁰ Ibid, 40.

²¹ Ibid, 49, African enculturation theologians have taken various angles, from the conservative to the liberal, measured by the attitude one has towards African Indigenous Religions.

²² The work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye best addresses this question.

3:16). In John's Gospel, the sonship of Jesus is most clearly seen by the depiction of God as the Father of Jesus. The sonship of Jesus, both in the physical and spiritual realm, is therefore well attested in the gospels and throughout the New Testament. The fact that Jesus was human and acquired divine status after death is not problematic for African thinking, since it is consistent with the concept of Ancestors, as people who actually lived as members of the family and community, acting as intermediaries between God and the living, even after death.²³

However, Jesus as the one and only intermediary was a huge shock to the African belief system and one that had serious gender implications in the spiritual and social realm. First, because colonial presentation insisted on discarding all African cultural beliefs:²⁴ Jesus was not presented as joining other existing Ancestors, but as erasing, invalidating and replacing all of them.²⁵ Second, where a whole community of the living dead acted as intermediaries, now *one single male was installed*, a move that violated the communal character of the sub-Saharan cultural cosmology. Third, this replacement had huge gender implications, for while the Ancestors included both male and female relatives, who assumed new status upon death, the installation of Jesus as the only legitimate intermediary between God and the living erased women from the spiritual realm. This was, of course, not helped by the fact that the biblical God was also well-endowed with male titles (such as Shepherd, Lord, King, Father, Mighty Warrior). Since the construction of a spiritual space has implications for the construction of social spaces, that is, God the father and Jesus, his son, sitting in the heavenly realm, also legitimize the emasculation of African social spaces.²⁶ Christianity has therefore entrenched patriarchy in the African social and spiritual worldview, a development that legitimizes the marginalization of African women from economic, political and social spheres of power.

Yet the African cultural worldview also cross-fertilized the biblical worldview. It was not only the biblical text that affected the African cultural worldview; the latter was actively potent. The first thing to acknowledge was that African oral cultures were pervasive "*scriptoratures*" (i.e. oral literature of sacred texts with religious content), that were embedded in the memories and members of African communities as compared with the biblical text, contained between two covers and dependent on readers. Every African person was the embodiment of African cultural beliefs, even those who were had apparently embraced the Christian faith, for as long as they belonged to African families, they remained in the cultural cosmology, naturally wired into family and communal Ancestors and to the Divine Being. The first major form of resistance, therefore, was that African oral cultures remained potent and, as Antonio points out above, 'inconsumerable'. The African oral canon would thus be brought in and read with the biblical text, as many studies on African Independent Churches attest. One such indicator would be the emphasis on the Spirit and the claim of the Spirit as the agent of empowerment.²⁷ The Spirit would enable women to claim positions of power, to become prophets and founders of churches, and claim to have heard God's call to the office of ordination.²⁸ Kimba Vita, the Congolese woman held to be the founding mother of African Independent Churches, for example, claimed that the Spirit of St Patrick was upon her, endowing her with

²³ See Robert J. Schreiter, ed. *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. New York: Orbis Press, 2002.

²⁴ See Kwesi Dickson. *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*. New York: Orbis Press, 1991.

²⁵ See Musa W. Dube, 'Consuming A Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo into "Demons" in the Setswana Bible', in Stephen Moore (ed), *JSNT* 73: 1999: 33-59.

²⁶ See IfiAmadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. London: Zed Books, 1987, 139-140, discussion of how Christian male symbols were accompanied by colonial intuitions, such as schools, churches, military services etc, that increasingly displaced African women from the public space by privileging males in new colonial professions.

²⁷ See Musa W. Dube, "Readings of *Semoya*: Batswana Women Interpretations of Matt. 15:21-28," 111-129. In *Semeia* Vol.73. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996b.

²⁸ See Goememang Tshinamo, *Women Church Leaders in Botswana: Documentation*. Gaborone: University of Botswana, 1999.

a prophetic voice against colonial Christianity that filled churches with white images of biblical characters.²⁹ She declared these white images as unacceptable idols, while she asserted that Jesus and his disciples were black!

In a number of studies on African Independent Churches, the realm where the Bible is read with and through African oral cultural beliefs, findings indicate that male-centred gender constructions are subverted through interpretations that call upon the oral canon. Fieldwork studies indicate that women in African who founded churches legitimized their authority to preach by creating a biblical genealogy of women Ancestors (characters), whom they invoke, together with other African women, each time they stand up to preach. As I pointed out:

I was listening to their sermons (St John Apostolic Faith Mission women) when I realized that, when each one of them stood up to preach, they said, 'I greet Mother Mary Magdalene, Mother Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mother Martha, the holy seats of Mother Mmanku and MmaAnderson, women who wear the belt of faith...' By greeting these biblical figures prior to preaching, four things were accomplished: first, these biblical women were given the ancestral status and venerated in the church. Second, by calling this group of women prior to their teaching, they were grounding their authority to preach in these women. Third, the creative identification of African women (Mmanku and MmaAnderson) with biblical women means they do not suffer from identifying themselves with male authority to preach... What is even more significant is that by including these women, biblical and local, they have employed an African worldview to create an inclusive Christology for themselves.³⁰

Second, the oral canon subverts the Bible's gender constructions, when women in the church overlook the written text by calling upon the oral canon. A good example was one woman who, when quizzed about her leadership position, which seemingly violated the deuterio-Pauline injunctions against women speaking or leading in church (2 Tim. 2:8-16), the woman chose not to engage the androcentric biblical texts, but rather to stake her legitimacy on the authority of the unwritten texts. She said, 'When God spoke to me, God never opened the Bible to me.'³¹ As Goememang Tshinamo's research on *Women Church Leaders in Botswana* highlights, African women's use of their indigenous oral canon is often attested by claims of seeing visions, having dreams and hearing God's voice calling them to full-time ministry.³² African academic women scholars have appealed to the African oral canon to construct their Christology. One such article is Elisabeth Amoah and Mercy A. Oduyoye's use of the Ghanaian female legend, Eku, to construct a female Christology.³³ The African oral text is invoked and used in such a way that it bypasses the androcentric biblical text, without dismissing its authority, but rather by supplementing it.

Translating the Bible, Translating Gender, Translating African Christianity

It is undeniable that the introduction of the Christian religion and its biblical text to African cultural worldviews in a colonial context was a moment of translation. The above discussion has already indicated how it was a translation of cultural worldviews from both sides. Yet even the translation of the biblical text into African languages was not only an attempt to translate African oral cultures into written languages, but

²⁹ See John Thornton, *The Congolese Saint Anthony: Kimba Vita and the Antonian Movement 1684-1706*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

³⁰ Musa W. Dube, "Woman, What have I to Do with You? (John 2:1-11): A Post-colonial Feminist Theological Reflection on the Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction," pp. 244-258. In Isabel Phiri, Kenneth Ross and James Cox eds. *The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction*. Eds. P Nairobi: AACC, 1996a, 256.

³¹ Musa W. Dube, "Readings of *Semoya*" 127.

³² Goememang Tshinamo. *Women Church Leaders in Botswana*.

³³ See Elisabeth Amoah and Mercy A. Oduyoye, "Christ for African Women," 35-46. In V. Fabella and M. A. Oduyoye, eds. *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. New York: Orbis Press, 1990.

it was also an active agenda that translated African ways of constructing gender in the spiritual and the social realm. A number of studies have been carried out to highlight how the translation of the biblical text into African languages was also the translation of gender-inclusive spiritual and social spheres into androcentric structures. This brings us to the translation of God in African Christianity. Such studies have been carried out by Aloo Mojola with a case study of the Iraqw people of Tanzania, Seratwa Ntloedibe Kuswani in the case of the Setswana Bible translation in Botswana, and Dora Mbuwayesango in the case of the Shona Bible translation. Since Bible translation worked with a theoretical translation that insisted on privileging the so-called source text rather than the receiving culture, biblical constructions of gender could not be enriched by the gender-inclusive African spiritual realm and African languages. While Ifi Amadiume held that most African cultures leaned towards matriarchal-centred gender construction, the biblical text is patriarchal and was largely favoured by translation theories employed to impose its worldview.

AlooMojola describes the politics of Bible and gender translation of the name of God among the Iraqw of Tanzania. According to Mojola,³⁴ the Iraqw people of Tanzania have always regarded God as female, while evil and its forces are characterized as male. Mojola emphasizes that ‘for them it is the devil who is male or masculine. It is he who has to be placated through sacrifice... God’s name is believed to be Looah... She is the provider, the protector, the merciful and the giver of life’.³⁵ Mojola further holds that Looah ‘satisfies the Christian qualities and attributes for the supreme God, such as the creator of the universe, loving, empowering and sustaining the created order, providing for all, concerned about fairness and justice, requiring mercy, moral order, etc.’³⁶ Yet this same people were presented with a Bible translation that presented God as male, which they found deeply unacceptable. While Looah had all the qualities that made her an acceptable equivalent of the biblical God, she had female gender! This was not consistent with the biblical God, who is endowed with characteristics associated with the male gender. To sideline Looah and enforce a masculine God, a Swahili name, Mungu, was imported into the Iraqw Bible translation. The Iraqw, shocked by this cruel inversion of their worldview, pleaded and resisted the translation. As Mojola writes as an eyewitness:

I recall a Bible reviewers’ seminar organized in Haydom, Mbulu, in 1990, where some of the Iraqw Christian leaders who were being trained to be reviewers of the ongoing Iraqw Old Testament translation strongly pleaded for a change in official church usage from God’s name in Swahili to God’s name i.e. from Mungu back to Looah. One leading Christian lady teacher at the Waama Bible School in Mbulu argued that she had found it difficult to do evangelism using God’s name in Swahili... One Lutheran priest... is said to have rebelled by maintaining or persisting in the use of Looah in his preaching and teaching.³⁷

The above citation demonstrates how the Iraqw Christians found the translation unacceptable, which leads us to ask, ‘Whose interests are served in such translations?’ Why are such translations carried out against the will of the communities of the concerned language and culture? But when we ask such questions, we are confronting the institutionalized theories of Bible translation that insists that the source text should not be changed, while the receiving culture can and must bend, break and be distorted to accommodate the so-called source text. This theoretical position also reflects the superiority that the biblical religion of Christianity claims for itself over other cultures, which legitimizes the violation of other

³⁴ Aloo Mojola, “How the Bible is Received in Communities: A Brief Overview with Particular Reference to East Africa,” 45-69. In Philip Wickeri, ed. *Scripture, Community and Mission*. Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2002.

³⁵ Ibid, 62.

³⁶ Aloo Mojola, “Bible Translation in Africa,” 141-162. In Phillip A. Noss, ed. *A History of Bible Translation*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, 159.

³⁷ Aloo Mojola, “How the Bible is Received in Communities,” 62-63.

cultures. Because the biblical text is largely masculine in its worldview, the Christianization of many African cultures has meant the patriarchalization of relationships.

The translation of African worldviews into androcentric perspectives is also attested by Seratwa Ntloedibe,³⁸ who holds that the Setswana concept of the divine *Modimo* (God), the *Badimo* (Ancestors) and the *Ditaola* (divining set) were gender-neutral, until the Setswana biblical translation was begun in 1840, in the history of Christianizing Southern Africa. In the process, the Modimo of Batswana became male and the Badimo (Ancestors), who were culturally regarded as divine and venerated, were equated with demons in the Setswana Bible translation. Dora Mbuwayesanyo has studied the history and process of the Shona Bible translation in Zimbabwe, showing how *Mwari* (God) of the Shona, who used to be gender-neutral, emerged fully dressed in male garments. She asserts, ‘The Shona understand Mwari to be a genderless spirit, neither male nor female. The attributes of Mwari all have to do with Mwari transcendence and creative attributes. Also, Mwari does not discriminate and can speak through women and even through objects, as well as through men.’³⁹

Although more in-depth studies are needed to document how the biblical imposition of the male gender on African Christianity was received and how it has affected gender relations in general, there are indications that the oral canon of African cultures remains resistant and inconsumable. The above citation from the Iraqw example gives us an indication, by pointing out that one of the priests ‘is said to have rebelled by maintaining or persisting in the use of Looah in his preaching and teaching’.⁴⁰ How about the rest of the members of this ethnic group of the Iraqw? We can assume that the rebellion of the priest is the tip of the iceberg, indicating that such a priest serves in a context where the community would find a biblically-imposed male God unacceptable (as is indeed attested in the same quote by the plea of its Christian leaders). The Iraqw priest preaches, therefore, a Christianity that is cross-fertilized by the African cultural view that views the creator God as female. It goes without saying that more research is needed on how this particular African culture – that of the Iraqw – reshapes the type of Christianity that emerges from such a context: how is the biblical text itself and its meaning translated through oral memories and readers? Much work is needed here.

Among the Batswana, where the colonial Setswana translation had included Ancestors in the Bible as demons that Jesus went around casting out, the oral canon of African cultures still prevailed. As I carried out research among women prophets of African Independent Churches, I soon discovered that they used the Bible as a divination book and carried out ancestral veneration rituals, where Jesus was among their ancestors – not over, above or as one who replaces them. Indeed:

This usage of the Bible and method of reading is stunningly subversive to colonizing narrative designs. The AICs’ readers resist the translation that turned Badimo into demons and devils in the Setswana Bible... Instead, they perceive the Bible from their own cultural perspective as a book that diagnoses relationships and promotes healing of relationships between people and divine powers... The Bible took its rightful place as one among many other divining sets. Badimo and Jesus/Holy Spirit also took their rightful place as divine powers that promoted good relationships and health where the Bible is read. This AIC’s strategy of resistance entailed a method of reading the written Setswana language through and with the unwritten text of Setswana cultures.⁴¹

These subversive readings counteract the patriarchal perspective of the Bible. This analytical observation from my side is supported by the first readers of Setswana Bible translations, who sent a

³⁸ See Seratwa Ntloedibe-Kuswani, “The Case of Modimo in the Setswana Bible”, 78-100. In Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: SBL, 2001.

³⁹ Dora R. Mbuwayesanyo, “How Local Divine Powers were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of the Shona,” 63-77. In Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: SBL, 2001, 63.

⁴⁰ Alooj Mojola, “How the Bible is Received in Communities,” 63.

⁴¹ See Musa W. Dube, “Consuming A Colonial Cultural Bomb,” 33-59.

barrage of letters to the London Missionary Society newsletter, *Mahoka a Becwana*, complaining that their language had been distorted and violated in the translation. Alfred Gould, its editor, received their complaints and promised to submit their concerns to the general missionary council meeting. Upon his return, he informed them that, unfortunately, the council meeting has resolved that the language would stand as translated (and that the same language would be used for the newspaper and other prayer books) despite the concerns of Batswana. The Batswana readers charged back through the oral African cultural canon, saying to the editor, ‘You should know that when we read our Bible, we change letters with our mouths’!⁴² Nothing better illustrates the persistent power of the oral canon of African cultures and how it shapes African Christianity.

Conclusion: African Pentecostal Christianity

It is on record that, since the 1970s, African Christianity is becoming increasingly Pentecostal. It is also documented that Pentecostal Christianity underlines the acts of the Holy Spirit and its worship seems democratic.⁴³ Yet the Holy Spirit in the mouths of many Pentecostal preachers is characterized as male. It is, therefore, debatable whether Pentecostal Christianity in Africa is necessarily more gender-inclusive than other forms of African Christianity. According to Mmadipoane Masenya, Pentecostal biblical reading is a two-edged sword that underlies both the patriarchal normativity of the Bible and the centrality of the Holy Spirit being poured upon all flesh.⁴⁴ Even so, Sarojini Nadar insists that the hermeneutic of the Spirit used in forms of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa needs to be subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion, for it has on several occasions demonstrated its capacity to accommodate gender and other forms of oppression.⁴⁵ Be that as it may, the emphasis on the theology of the Spirit allows for negotiation of the spread of power among men and women, although not always successfully. More studies are needed on Pentecostal biblical interpretation and the kind of gender relations it supports.⁴⁶

Of particular note is that Pentecostal Christianity in Africa is less accommodating of African oral beliefs, since it supposedly urges followers to ‘make a complete break with the past’.⁴⁷ Other scholars insist that ‘it is pertinent to note that the traditional African cosmology of evil and healing are central to the beliefs of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Africa’.⁴⁸ Overall, the three small windows on Gender, Bible and African Christianity in this paper underline that it is a constantly negotiated position in different forms of denominations, forms of Christianity, countries, ethnicities and times. It is, more often than not, a contested space of power between biblical texts and African oral traditions, that shape gender relations within the contact zone of two or more spiritual and social spaces. These gendered perspectives affect how power is distributed among females and males in the African Church and the communities they

⁴² Mgadla, P. and S.C. Volz (translators/compilers). *Words of Batswana: Letters to Mahoka a Becwana 1883-1896*. Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society, 2006, 33.

⁴³ For a comprehensive west African study, see Kwabena J. Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*, Brill, Leiden, 2005.

⁴⁴ Masenya Madipoane, ‘The Sword that Heals! The Bible and African Women in African South African Pentecostal Churches’, in I.A. Phiri & S. Nadar (eds), *On Being Church: African Women’s Voices and Visions*, pp. 47-59, WCC, Geneva, 2005.

⁴⁵ Sarojini Nadar. ‘On Being Pentecostal Church: Pentecostal Women’s Voices and Visions,’ in I.A. Phiri & S. Nadar (eds), *On Being Church: African Women’s Voices and Visions*, 60-79, WCC, Geneva, 2005.

⁴⁶ See Rose Gabaitse. *Towards A Pentecostal Feminist Hermeneutic: Reading Luke-Acts With Batswana Women*. University of KwaZulu Natal PhD, 2012.

⁴⁷ B. Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999.

⁴⁸ See Matthew A. Ojo, ‘Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Africa,’ 295-309. In Elias Bongmba ed. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, 308.

serve. If, however, African Christianity's mandate is to spread the justice-seeking message of salvation, healing and deliverance, to their members and the communities they serve, then they must seek to emphasise gender-equity in all their structures and programmes.

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