

# Black Theology in Theological Education

## Expanding the Boundaries through African Women's Theologies

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### Abstract

*The development and key features of African women's theologies, primarily through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, has entered the mainstream of theological education, which could provide insights for Black theology. In the landscape of theological education, which has been dominated by western-centric approaches, Black theology and the quest for liberation have made some inroads in challenging dominant discourses. However, aspirations for a liberative Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy are yet to be realized. This paper will briefly survey the development of Black theology, primarily in the South African context, where theology was dominated by universal Western claims to theological education and repressive anti-Black theology. Second, the development of African women's theologies, primarily through the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, will be explored with particular features which created inroads in theological education despite its marginal position. Finally, the paper will review how robust engagement with the lived realities of African women and their communities through engendering theological education has broadened the scope of the educational enterprise. The intersectional methodological and pedagogical approaches of African women's theologies open up space to focus on praxis and the lived realities of Africans, which could be instructive to proponents of Black theology.*

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## Keywords

*African women's theologies, Black theology, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, theological education*

## The Influence of Black Theology

Black theology was developed to respond to the very real challenges and threats posed to Black peoples by the manifest evil of racism in the world.<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, Black theology originated in the early 1970s in response to the oppression of apartheid, a capitalist ideology promoting white supremacy and Black subjugation and inferiority. Apartheid dominated all segments of society and social life, including theological education.<sup>2</sup> Black theology was founded in resistance to racist repression, even as African theology emerged in reaction to colonial domination. Over time, Black theology was considered an extension of African theology, although some, such as John Mbiti, initially rejected the kinship of African theology and Black theology.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Desmond Tutu, recognized the need to synthesize the scope of religious pursuits of Black Africans and Blacks in America to gain freedom from discriminatory legacies of white supremacy through colonialism and apartheid.<sup>4</sup> Both Black and African theologies faced resistance, dismissal, and diminishment from the dominating forces of American and European theology and those in control of theological education on the continent.

Mokgethi Motlhabi provides a historical review of five phases in Black theology in South Africa and its relationship to James Cone's American Black theology and African theology.<sup>5</sup> Motlhabi traces the ups and downs of Black theology over 30 years, through phases of emergence among students, engagement with Black consciousness, growth of Black academics, engagement of white academics,

<sup>1</sup> Anthony G. Reddie, "Crisis in Black Theology: Reasserting a Future Based on Spiritual Liberative Praxis," *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 76:3 (2020), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.6152>. The terms "Black theology" and "Black liberation theology" will be used interchangeably in this article due to the emphasis on the liberation of Black people globally.

<sup>2</sup> Edward P. Antonio, "Mapping Black Theology Globally," *Religion Compass* 5:2 (2011), 61–70, at 64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2010.00259.x>.

<sup>3</sup> John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 379–84.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu, "Black Theology/African Theology: Soul Mates or Antagonists?" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 385–92.

<sup>5</sup> Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Phases of Black Theology in South Africa: A Historical Overview," *Religion and Theology* 16:3-4 (2009), 162–80, <https://doi.org/10.1163/102308009X12561890523555>.

widening to include gender and class, and a wilderness period after the fall of apartheid which left the movement in an ambiguous lull. Motlhabi asserts that, although landmark volumes were produced and generations of Black theologians were activated along the way, Black theology never managed to establish itself as a visible presence in the academy toward acceptance as an academic discipline in theological education.<sup>6</sup> Theological education was grounded solidly in the Western missionary movement, rooted in modernist and enlightenment philosophies that denigrated African knowledge systems. In *Un-thinking the West: The Spirit of Doing Black Theology of Liberation in Decolonial Times*, Vuyani Vellem cautions that Black liberation theology has marvelled in its critique of white theology but continues to do so without demonstrating that there is a sense in which its principles and vision could feasibly render this school as sheer theory and nothing more.<sup>7</sup>

Anthony G. Reddie suggests that after apartheid, Black theology in South Africa may be labelled as a “temporary, even aberrant, discipline” tied to the struggle for liberation in a utilitarian way, which has led to its alleged demise.<sup>8</sup> Offering a perspective on the future of theological education, Kaunda identifies pluralism, social-material distress, and globalization as factors influencing young Africans, who call for the reconceptualization of theological education methodology to fit ever-changing, fluid societies.<sup>9</sup> He purports that young Africans are searching for new African communities that “celebrate diversity, complexity, richness, ambiguity, emergency identities, and new socio-cultural life.”<sup>10</sup> These reflections raise questions of how a Black theology of liberation has adapted to engage with theological education.

## The Roots of African Women’s Theologies

In light of such questions posed to Black theology, the development of African women’s theology, most often referred to in the plural form as “theologies,” reflects a commitment to diversity, complexity, and qualities suitable for Africa’s changing contexts. Since African women on the continent lacked substantive representation in Black theology or African theology, African women’s theologies were forged in the face of many challenges. The advent of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>7</sup> Vuyani Vellem, “Un-Thinking the West: The Spirit of Doing Black Theology of Liberation in Decolonial Times,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73:3 (November 2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4737>.

<sup>8</sup> Reddie, “Crisis in Black Theology,” 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> Chammah J. Kaunda, “Checking Out the Future: A Perspective from African Theological Education,” *International Review of Mission* 105:1 (2016), 113–30, at 115, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12120>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

(hereafter the Circle) is well documented as a response to the lack of voice and presence of African women in the theological enterprise.<sup>11</sup> Historically, theological education was designed to prepare men to be ordained to lead churches, with denominations and missionary societies largely against the ordination of women.<sup>12</sup> Barred from ordained ministry, few women were encouraged to study theology or teach at theological institutions.<sup>13</sup> Today, with the growth of African women's theologies, the number of women studying theology in Africa has steadily increased compared to the number of men.<sup>14</sup> Although previously there were few women involved in church structures or theological education, pressure began to mount over the years to include more women in the study of theology and church leadership through ecumenical organizations that have been challenging "traditions, cultures, and the reading of the biblical texts."<sup>15</sup>

In the classic text *Introduction to African Women's Theology*, founding mother Mercy Oduyoye declares, "The injustice that women experience has become the context of their theology."<sup>16</sup> The influence of African women's theologies began to rise in the 1980s due largely to the establishment of the Circle, which was formed to "write theology from the perspective of African women."<sup>17</sup> The choice was made to bring together women from all the major faiths in Africa, including Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions, to focus on issues denying life to African people, such as the legacy of colonialism, "poverty, poor governance, AIDS, wars and genocide."<sup>18</sup>

## Characteristics of African Women's Theologies

African women's theologies started from a foundation of robust engagement with the lived reality of African communities, requiring a broadening framework of justice,

<sup>11</sup> See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, *History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007* (Luwinga: Mzuni Press, 2017); Sarojini Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba, 1st ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri and Esther Mombo, "Women in Theological Education from an African Perspective," in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, ed. Dietrich Werner et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989–2008)," *International Review of Mission* 98:1 (2009), 105–19, at 111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2009.00009.x>.

<sup>14</sup> Kaunda, "Checking Out the Future," 122.

<sup>15</sup> Phiri and Mombo, "Women in Theological Education," 59.

<sup>16</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Introductions in *Feminist Theology* 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 36.

<sup>17</sup> Esther Mombo, "Considerations for an Inclusive Global Theological Education," *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 449–60, at 454, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12442>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

equality, and ecology in theological education. Where dominant models of theological education failed to reflect adequately on the lived realities of oppressed groups, Circle theologians, similar to African American womanist theologians, included analysis of concrete social, cultural, and political situations as their starting point.<sup>19</sup> Akin to other liberation theologies, African women's theologies' analysis and critique revealed exploitation, discrimination, and alienation toward liberative praxis, reframing the theological task.

Mombo compared the work of the Circle and African American womanist theology as case studies of innovation for global inclusion in theological education derived from experiences of exclusion and marginalization.<sup>20</sup> Mombo shows how African women theologians and African American womanist theologians resist and innovate in the face of triple oppression in striving for liberative pedagogy.<sup>21</sup> Mombo purports that African women's theologies contest racism, imperialism, and tribalism as historical and contextual realities. At the same time, American womanists theologize from historical and contextual realities at the intersection of race, class, and gender toward a communal struggle for life and wholeness.<sup>22</sup> Both African women's theologies and womanist theology contend for the inclusion of Black women's experience as a means to comprehend the marginalization of Black people in dominant theological frameworks. Grounded in the lived experiences of African women, Circle theologians, beginning with Mercy Oduyoye, have identified several transformative features or approaches that characterize African women's theological engagement.<sup>23</sup> Distinct characteristics – such as a focus on plurality, feminist cultural hermeneutics, liberative reclaiming of scripture, advocacy in praxis, and communal theological reflection – opened an innovative space to expand the boundaries of theological education. As African women theologians have provided a sustained influence in theological education, their approach could be instructive in widening the influence of Black theology.

## Communal Theology

As much as Black theologians contended for the liberation of Black people, their writings appear to speak for the Black community, often excluding the experience of

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 452–58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>23</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*; Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies," in *Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy: An Introduction for African Universities*, ed. James Amanze, F. Nkomazana, and Obed N. Kealotswe (Eldoret: Zapf Chancery, 2010), 213–27, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Black and African women. In contrast, African women theologians were intentional in seeking communal approaches to theology, including mutual mentoring with a concern for maintaining the well-being of African women and, ultimately, the whole community. Phiri and Nadar wrote a salient article outlining a framework of key features of African women's theologies, most of which will be covered in the remaining sections of this article.<sup>24</sup> By choosing the motif of a circle, the women created an ongoing commitment to a relational and communal approach to theology by "replacing hierarchies with mutuality."<sup>25</sup> Reflecting the community orientation and communal nature of African culture requires sensitivity to the needs of others and the well-being of the whole community.<sup>26</sup> From its origin, the Circle hosted Pan-African conferences and workshops and coordinated regional gatherings, encouraging the development of spaces for African women theologians to gather together to listen and learn from one another.

Kanyoro identified the work of the Circle as engendered communal theology asserting a commitment to change oppressive systems, which has to be done in the community, "otherwise its validity will be questioned."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the chapters and conferences of the Circle provided critical spaces for women to do scholarly communal theology.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, African women theologians have sought to affirm the experiences, voices, and stories of grassroots women in communities who form the backbone of faith communities on the continent. The use of story and narrative method provided the vehicle for communal sharing and reflection of often hidden and repressed stories of African women, while tapping into the biblical narrative of equally constrained women to build safe spaces for solidarity with others. Kanyoro described engendered communal theology as a method to give African women their own voice and space to break long-held silences.<sup>29</sup> Recognizing the sacredness of each woman's story, inclusive tables were built through the use of storytelling, proverbs, and myths of the African context alongside scriptural narratives.

Theological messages, we suggest, are also coded into myths, folktales, proverbs, and maxims and in ritual practices that are the common heritage of all Africans, whatever their

<sup>24</sup> Phiri and Nadar, "What's in a Name?" describes seven key features of African women's theologies, which are featured throughout this article.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-First Century," *Feminist Theology* 9:27 (May 2001), 36–56, at 46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500100002704>.

<sup>28</sup> Phiri and Nadar, "What's in a Name?" 222.

<sup>29</sup> Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology," 46.

religious affiliation.<sup>30</sup> From their origins, African women's theologies were able to include reflection on the cultural and religious experience of African women, acknowledging the embodied and contextual nature of theological reflection. Such communal theological reflection has had to deal with the community in its manifestations of empowerment as well as its organized limitations on the individual and often on initiatives and innovations.<sup>31</sup> In developing and doing theology in "consciously multicultural and multireligious contexts," dialogue and cultural sensitivity are required within and between cultures.<sup>32</sup>

## Plurality

Black theology creates a much-needed response to ruling Western paradigms that controlled theological discourses for centuries. Early on, Desmond Tutu argued for plurality of theologies and kinship between Black and African theology as different yet valid correctives of Western theology's distorted universal claims forged in enlightenment thinking and white domination.<sup>33</sup> Advocating for diverse approaches, Tutu suggested, "There must be plurality of theologies because we don't all apprehend the transcendent in exactly the same way nor can we be expected to express our experience in the same way."<sup>34</sup> From the beginning, the Circle emphasized diversity and plurality in the theological process. This was accomplished in part by highlighting the significance of positionality and the influence of one's background for those in the process of producing theology. Including multiple perspectives, they sought ways to embrace the tension between various religious perspectives, welcoming differences and providing space for dialogue, conflict, and collaboration. By starting with an inclusive mandate and bringing together Christian women, Muslim women, and women practising African traditional religions, the Circle was able to incorporate the multifaith context of Africa.<sup>35</sup>

The Circle prioritized learning from women "'doing' and living out their theology on the ground," so they avoided "homogenizing the African women's experience." In this way, they are able to glean knowledge from the stories and experiences of a wide spectrum of women.<sup>36</sup> Still, plurality remained aspirational in some respects, as the

<sup>30</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Tutu, "Black Theology/African Theology," 380.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Mombo, "Considerations," 254.

<sup>36</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, eds, *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), 2.

substantive publications of the Circle focused on Christianity. Analyzing the work of the Circle, Ayanga recognized the shortfall of “Islamic and African Traditional voices and perspectives” to tackle the interreligious disputes of the continent.<sup>37</sup> Despite the uneven documentation of all women affected by religion and culture on the continent, the theology of African women developed over decades to produce vital resources for theological and religious education. The proliferation of publications in the form of articles, chapters in books, and edited books by Circle members documents the success of the vision and mission to promote the writings of African women theologians.<sup>38</sup> Through the Circle, African women produced relevant theological resources that have enjoyed limited distribution and use in theological education institutions on the continent and globally.<sup>39</sup> Whether the plethora of resources produced by the Circle were embraced by theological institutions or not, African women created diverse theological resources reflecting the reality of African women in the community. Phiri identified the circulation of the Circle literature to theological institutions in Africa as one of the most significant challenges of the movement.<sup>40</sup>

## Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics

In opposition to dominant Western ideals of Christianity, Black liberation theology tapped into Black consciousness to celebrate blackness, while African theology validated African worldviews and practices cultivating an appreciation for Black and African identity and being.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, in the celebration of Black identity and culture, the experiences of the African males were centred, silencing the voices and experiences of African women in formulating these significant contextual theologies.<sup>42</sup> The construction of Black and African theology was largely the work of male theologians who failed to include the ways women were subjects and custodians of venerable practices and oppression in the context of the community.

African woman theologians identified a feminist cultural hermeneutic, recognizing culture as a source of theology while critiquing detrimental aspects of culture that harmed

<sup>37</sup> Hazel O. Ayanga, “Voice of the Voiceless: The Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37:2 (2016), 5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1580>.

<sup>38</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, “The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” *Ecumenical Review* 57:1 (2005), 34–41, at 36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2005.tb00216.x>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Phiri, “Major Challenges,” 114.

<sup>41</sup> Phiri and Nadar, “What’s in a Name?” 218.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19.



women and girls.<sup>43</sup> It was a work of resisting “culturally coded Christianity that came to Africa from the west,” which denigrated African cultural practices. The focus was to reclaim, celebrate, and criticize the diversity of African cultures that could ably host Christianity.<sup>44</sup> In resisting the historical demonization of African culture, African women found ways to celebrate the positive aspects of diverse practices along with an ability to critique and name oppressive aspects of culture. The cultural hermeneutic identifies life-affirming cultural elements while naming damaging aspects of culture. This approach affirms women’s full humanity and participation in religion and society, maintaining a “critical stance on African culture as well as promoting its commitment to wholeness and enhancement of life in the community.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, cultural hermeneutics provide tools to help women analyze personal and communal experiences of religion and culture while unmasking “sins of oppression and injustice,” making space for collective repentance and change in society.<sup>46</sup> In retaining liberative aspects and rejecting oppressive aspects of African culture, feminist cultural hermeneutics promote a standard of abundant life for the whole community, male and female.<sup>47</sup>

## Reclaiming the Use of the Bible as a Source of Theology

African women theologians recognized how the Bible has been a site of struggle for women, as a blessing with a message of liberation and a challenge in denying their freedom.<sup>48</sup> Together with a feminist cultural hermeneutic, African women applied a biblical hermeneutic that recognized the way culture shapes the reading of sacred texts in community. “Cultural hermeneutics enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberating.”<sup>49</sup> Using the Bible as a “central source of theologizing,” African women’s theologies have brought the Bible into dialogue with African culture and religions.<sup>50</sup> By recognizing the ways the Bible depicts people in a historic cultural milieu requiring analysis, African women theologians applied the same cautious approach to their own culture. Thus, analysis of historical and contemporary cultures is required,

<sup>43</sup> Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology,” 36–56; Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*.

<sup>44</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christianity and African Culture,” *International Review of Mission* 84:332–333 (1995), 89.

<sup>45</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology,” 43.

<sup>47</sup> Phiri and Nadar, “What’s in a Name?” 220.

<sup>48</sup> Mombo, “Considerations,” 455.

<sup>49</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Phiri and Nadar, “What’s in a Name?” 224.

recognizing that if biblical interpretation “does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless,” it is unacceptable.<sup>51</sup> Taking account of contextual experiences, African women are encouraged to read and interpret the Bible and culture, examining life-giving principles while rejecting “domesticating and death-dealing demands” as contradictory to God’s will for humanity and creation.<sup>52</sup>

This application of a cultural hermeneutic along with a hermeneutic of suspicion, articulated by feminist theologians, presented readers and practitioners with a nuanced critical approach to the ways the scripture was used in African communities to oppress women and vulnerable members. The hermeneutic of suspicion helped to counteract the patriarchal and imperial interpretations of Christian tradition and classical forms of theologizing that tended to claim universal and “objective” application.<sup>53</sup> Mombo highlights how the Circle theologians provide ways to read the Bible that “identify the pain and suffering of women but also provide ways of realizing their liberation,” reinterpreting a text that is “largely patriarchal” but remains authoritative for those practising the Christian faith.<sup>54</sup> Narrative approaches and cultural hermeneutics help recognize the patriarchal way text has been read and used, bringing it into dialogue with lived reality.<sup>55</sup> By grounding the interpretation and application of the Bible in community, a way was opened for theological education and practice to be deeply connected to the community.

## Advocacy in Praxis

Moving from the base of the community, African women’s theologies interweave stories from “the Bible, Africa’s history and culture, and from the women’s own experiences of social change.”<sup>56</sup> In recognizing that history regularly focuses on the “high” stories, women often absorb the fallout of societal contestations and contend for a sense of equilibrium in the family and community. As a result, African women’s theological reflections combine spirituality, theology, and ethics to move to “commitment, advocacy and a transforming praxis.”<sup>57</sup> One only needs to trace the focal themes of African women’s theology through the Circle to recognize the centring of experiences of marginalization in ways that point the focus of theology and, by extension, theological education

<sup>51</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Nadar, “Feminist Theologies in Africa,” 273.

<sup>54</sup> Mombo, “Considerations,” 455.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

toward advocacy and praxis in church and community. Early study commissions were formed to research, write, and publish focusing on four areas: religion in pluralistic cultures; biblical and cultural hermeneutics; theological and ministerial formation of women; and biographies and histories of women in religion in Africa.<sup>58</sup>

As the Circle grew regionally, they continued to host gatherings targeting neglected topics in theological and ecclesial institutions, such as violence against women. Their studies cut across religious affiliation, age, class, education levels, and culture.<sup>59</sup> The Circle writers called out where the Bible has silenced women, naming this as evil. They took up themes such as “Transforming Power, Women in the Household of God” and “Sex, Stigma and HIV and AIDS,” with a recent focus on “Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and Theological, Religious, Philosophical, Cultural Imagination.”<sup>60</sup> African women theorized at the micro level from the vulnerability of Black women’s bodies to the macro level with the plundering of the earth’s resources. Encouraging women at the grassroots to voice their experiences and express their pain in the context of culture and religion, the Circle theologians observed, described, and recorded these stories as living data for research and publication.<sup>61</sup> In these processes of centring the narratives of women, conscientization, analysis, theological reflection, and informed action remained focal points.

The Circle made a concerted effort to address HIV/AIDS as a priority for research and advocacy between 2002 and 2007 to influence tangibly the attitudes of theological institutions and churches. The Circle theologians highlighted the vulnerability and burden of care women carried as the “most ostracized and stigmatized members of society,” where they were “often blamed for bringing the virus into families.”<sup>62</sup> By compelling members to reflect theologically on the gendered nature of HIV/AIDS, the focus shifted to empowering communities through deep reflection on the context of the disease in Africa, education raising, and conscientization.<sup>63</sup> The impact of Circle publications became evident through multiple series of articles and 31 books, with at least one book for every region of the continent, all helping to mainstream HIV/AIDS into the curriculum of theological institutions and ecclesial structures.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, “The Story of a Circle,” *Ecumenical Review* 53:1 (2001), 97–100, at 99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2001.tb00080.x>.

<sup>59</sup> Mombo, “Considerations,” 454–55.

<sup>60</sup> Phiri, “Major Challenges,” 107; Mombo, “Considerations,” 457–58.

<sup>61</sup> Ayanga, “Voice of the Voiceless,” 2–3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Phiri and Nadar, “What’s in a Name?” 222.

<sup>64</sup> Ayanga, “Voice of the Voiceless,” 3.

## Engendering Theological Education

As much as Black theology provided an important polemic against dominant oppressive forms of Western white theology, Black theologians failed to imbue theological education with lasting reflection on their work. Alternatively, African women's theologies found ways over three decades to make substantial inroads into the theological education enterprise. This influence may emanate from a targeted focus to engender theological education, which questioned traditional normative assumptions such as "a western theological model, African patriarchy, and male-centred theology," while proposing relevant inclusive alternatives "fruitful for an affirming life of faith."<sup>65</sup> The engendering process included promoting the teaching of gender issues within theological curricula and "making gender a concept in theological analysis" to interrogate injustices in the church, culture, and the Bible in connection to the relationships between men and women.<sup>66</sup> Phiri and Mombo describe two aspects of the engendering process that pushed for inclusivity. The first involved delinking theology and ordination, making theology available "to all people at all levels, moving away from being exclusively male. The second approach involved making theology relevant and life-affirming to men and women within theological curriculum, by clarifying and reformulating a theological vision toward greater inclusion."<sup>67</sup> African women's engendering processes included directing attention to methods of delivery emphasizing dialogical approaches, which brought people "into conversation with one another about their environment, context, faith, and praxis."<sup>68</sup> For example, gender discrimination was viewed in perspective with other forms of oppression such as classism, racism, HIV/AIDS, globalization, and practices of religious intolerance.<sup>69</sup>

## The Enduring Influence of African Women's Theologies on Theological Education

It is not just any kind of theological education that can determine the future of African Christianity, but quality, inventive, innovative, creative, relevant, proactive, responsive, visionary, contextual, and sound education.<sup>70</sup> Reflection on the history and characteristics of the development of African women's theologies demonstrates

<sup>65</sup> Phiri and Mombo, "Women in Theological Education," 61.

<sup>66</sup> Phiri, "Major Challenges," 113.

<sup>67</sup> Phiri and Mombo, "Women in Theological Education," 61.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Kaunda, "Checking Out the Future," 127.

sustained efforts toward this ingenuity described by Kaunda. Circle thinking, literally and figuratively, lends itself to an ever-expanding circle rather than a linear trajectory or hierarchical approaches.<sup>71</sup> Women in religion and society face untold challenges where they “continue to suffer violence at all levels: emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual.”<sup>72</sup> Theological education in the African context must be responsive to the lived realities being faced by people in society and the church. Despite the need for their work, African Women theologians continue to experience resistance in theological institutions in the form of discrimination and pushback in church and culture, even while the number of women studying theology grows.<sup>73</sup>

Although African women’s theologies have faced challenges of marginalization and lulls in momentum, as Black theology has, they have sustained influence in African communities, churches, and theological institutions through praxis characterized by plurality, communal theology, cultural hermeneutics, reclaiming the Bible, advocacy, and engendering theological education. Perhaps African women’s theologies host the necessary elements to inform inclusive global theological education as proposed by Mombo.<sup>74</sup> Through reliance on women’s experiences of marginalization, critiquing oppression, and seeking liberation as an integral part of theology, African women are challenging patriarchy reflected in racism, imperialism, and tribalism.<sup>75</sup> Rooted in the embodied experience of African communities, African women’s theologies have proven agility and innovation to reconceptualize theological education suitable for the context.

Maluleke’s historical reflection on the development of African Christian theologies, revisited by Nadar, points to the new way being charted by African women theologians, which presents a challenge to African and Black theologies. Whereas Black and African theologies have for the past half-century argued for the *validity* of African Christianities and the *legitimacy* of African culture, African feminist/womanist theology is charting a new way. This theology is mounting a critique of both African culture and African Christianity in ways that previous African theologies have not been able to do. From these theologies, we may learn how to be truly African and yet critical of aspects of African culture. African womanist theologians are teaching us how to criticize African

<sup>71</sup> Oduyoye, “The Story of a Circle,” 97.

<sup>72</sup> Mombo, “Considerations,” 490.

<sup>73</sup> Kaunda, “Checking Out the Future,” 122.

<sup>74</sup> Mombo, “Considerations.”

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

culture without denigrating it, showing us that the one does not and should not necessarily lead to the other.<sup>76</sup>

Although the continued development of African women's theologies has been less than perfect, sustained focus on elements such as communal theology, centring a plurality of marginal voices, the employment of feminist cultural hermeneutics, the focus on praxis in/with the community, and explicitly inclusive approaches to gender have aided in influencing theological education.<sup>77</sup> These inroads have emerged from sustained efforts by African women theologians to gather and publish while remaining self-critical and adaptable. Through the Circle, the presence of a movement has been established across the continent. African women have navigated the landscape of theological education from the margins, extending an ecumenical appeal and mainstreaming African women's theologies to some extent.<sup>78</sup> Although Black theology has provided a necessary critique of endemic racism in Christianity and fresh biblical hermeneutics, it may learn from the praxis, insights, and agility of the Circle, whose theologians over time have found ways to remain "conscious of the vastness, divisions, affinities, and diversities of Africa."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997), 4–23, at 21–22; Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," 271–72.

<sup>77</sup> Nadar, "Feminist Theologies in Africa," 276–77.

<sup>78</sup> Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies," 20–22.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 23.