


# Re-framing women's agency in #Blessed sex: Intersectional dilemmas for African women's theologies

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The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has since its inception, affirmed the agency of women in their theological reflection and praxis. In doing so, they have called on their male colleagues to stand in solidarity with them in forging alternative masculinities that renew culture, curb gender-based violence and mitigate HIV infection. This essay argues that there are three assumptions that form the basis of the work of the Circle theologians. Firstly, that women seek to be in egalitarian relationships with men that bring dignity and respect. Secondly, women assert their agency to achieve this goal and in so doing bring healing and wholeness to both groups who are transformed through this process. Thirdly, women assert their agency in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. Yet, the recent phenomenon of the #Blessed community of young women who seek out 'blessers', older men who engage them in transactional sex, in order to fund opulent lifestyles contradicts these assumptions. Their agency embraces non-liberative ideology and practice and chooses not to unseat the dominant ideologies of hetero- and econo-patriarchy.

**Contribution:** The essay concludes that a lack of sustained economic analysis and engaged theological reflection on sexual ethics means the Circle is ill-equipped to respond to the challenge posed by the #Blessed community of young women.

**Keywords:** women's agency; #Blessed; sexual ethics; young women; older men; Circle theology.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the inaugural address at the 1989 conference of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle) in Accra, Ghana, Mercy Oduyoye asserted that exploring African culture through networks of solidarity found in church women's groups was the key to African women's theologising (Oduyoye 1990:48). The Circle is committed to research on the effects of religion and culture on women's lives from the perspective of women and to produce theological texts that will influence theological education into the future (Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1990). Since the inaugural conference, African women theologians have produced numerous theological texts across the continent over the 30-year period. During this period, the Circle has often been at the forefront of addressing *Kairos* moments in Africa. The first of these was in the early 2000s as the HIV epidemic began to take hold of the continent. The implications of the HIV epidemic for theological reflection (with particular emphasis on African women) was extensively discussed and a theological agenda was set at the Circle Pan African Conference in Addis Ababa in 2002 (Dube 2009). Over the next 10 years a body of work by Circle writers emerged that was true to this agenda with the publication of at least seven edited volumes and scores of journal articles in honour of this commitment as recorded by Dube (2009:228–234). The second *Kairos* moment is more recent. At the 30th anniversary celebratory Circle Pan African Conference at the University of Botswana, the theme of the conference embraced 'Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological, Religious, Cultural and Philosophical Imagination'.

This focus on environmental degradation is one of the first by a group of African scholars to address what has become a global crisis. Three volumes have already been published since this

1. This article was first delivered at the Council for World Mission (CWM), Discernment and Radical Engagement (DARE) consultation in Taiwan, June 2019. I am indebted to CWM for their sponsorship and for providing the opportunity to engage in the DARE process that offered stimulating engagement with scholars from around the world.

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conference and there are more to follow (eds. Berman et al. 2021; eds. Daniel, Kebaneilwe & Swart 2021; eds. Matholeni, Boateng & Manyonganise 2020).

Circle writers have periodically addressed the challenge posed by former Circle Co-ordinator, Musimbi Kanyoro 'to critique each other, while formulating alternative and new theories' (quoted in Dube 2009:198). In 2006 in the introduction to the volume of essays in honour of Mercy Amba Ewudwiza Oduyoye, founder of the Circle, the editors Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, attempted to take up this challenge posed by Kanyoro (eds. Phiri & Nadar 2006:1–17). However, Musa Dube has undertaken the most sustained critique of Circle work, primarily on HIV. In 2009 in a volume published under the auspices of the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAAIA), two chapters were included by Dube dedicated to an assessment and critique of the Circle writings on HIV and AIDS referred to here (Dube 2009:173–236). My own work has attempted in a limited way to engage aspects of Circle writings critically in order to formulate areas needing further theological reflection (Haddad 2013). This article too stands in this Circle tradition of self-critique and reflection, a process that is important to ensure that the work of the Circle continues to make a relevant theological contribution to pressing issues of the day facing African women.

Circle texts have always been at the forefront of critiquing patriarchy and culture. They have asserted women's agency and called for solidarity from male theologians in formulating alternative masculinities in order to renew culture, curb gender-based violence and mitigate HIV infection. A number of scholarly attempts to record the theological contribution of the Circle attest to this (Ayanga 2016; Fiedler 2017; Labeodan 2016). In assessing Circle publications as a whole, it becomes clear that at the heart of this body of work lies three assumptions. Firstly, women seek to be in egalitarian relationships with men who bring dignity and respect. Secondly, women assert their agency to achieve this goal and in so doing bring healing and wholeness to both groups who are transformed through this process. Thirdly, women assert their agency in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. However, what is less clear is how these assumptions relate directly to economic issues facing African women. In the decades that have passed since the inception of the Circle, the globalised world economy invades every aspect of women's lives. Globalisation defines the commodification of women's bodies, labour and family life, facilitated by technological advances in the reach of social media and leading to a strong focus on individualistic materialism. In assessing the body of Circle work, including my own, there is little evidence of systematic analysis of the intersection of culture and patriarchy with the globalised economy that in turn reflects on how economic systems impact African women's lives.

My own awareness of this lack of analysis has emerged as I have wrestled with understanding the reasons for the

growing HIV incidence rates amongst young women between the ages of 15 and 24 years within South Africa. There is a large body of social science research indicating that the leading cause of this increased HIV incidence in this gendered age group is as a result of young women having sex with older men (see West and Haddad). While 'sugar daddy' relationships have been the focus of research, the more recent turn to the 'blesser' phenomenon as a form of transactional sex is a more recent development with a growing focus within the field of social science (Hoss & Blockland 2018; Moodley & Ebrahim 2019; Tsoaledi, Tshilidzi & Rally 2017; Varjavandi 2017). Within the theological terrain there is also an increased focus, although more nuanced analysis is less forthcoming (Frieslaar & Masango 2021; Haddad 2018; Masenya 2017). Here, the #Blessed community of young women actively seek out transactional sex with older men, 'blessers', in order to attain economic prosperity in the form of lifestyles that would otherwise be unattainable. This article is an attempt to interrogate the agency of young women who seemingly counter the values espoused by Circle theology. Their particular form of agency does not seek to destabilise hetero-patriarchy, it is not based on solidarity with other women, and there is no concern for the structural transformation of the globalised economy in contexts of vast economic disparities such as South Africa.

Transactional sex has been interrogated extensively in social science studies as I have demonstrated in previous work, including the ethical complexities of young girls having sex with older men in order to meet the survival needs of their families (Haddad 2018; West & Haddad 2016). However, the #Blessed community engages in transactional sex for different reasons, namely to fund an excessively opulent lifestyle that disregards the needs of others and is propagated narcissistically on social media (Haddad 2018). The attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles of the #Blessed community thus pose a number of intersectional dilemmas for the theological terrain, especially that of African women's theologies.

What is significant for this discussion is the fact that the #Blessed community of young women are agentive in the use of their bodies as they engage in transactional sex. They make a deliberate choice to use hetero-patriarchy for their own ends because it offers them the opulent lifestyle they desire through this agentive transactional behaviour. Yet their agency does not necessarily free them from the system of patriarchy because it is this system that holds the economic power necessary to meet their economic needs. They are trapped in what I, together with Gerald West, have termed 'econo-patriarchy'. We use this term as a heuristic concept in order to explore the intersection between economic systems and patriarchy. We have riffed the term 'econo-patriarchy' off the more familiar term 'hetero-patriarchy' indicating that aspects of patriarchy hold inherent economic power. In developing this notion further in biblical studies West (2020) argued that Jezebel (I Kings 21) colludes with patriarchy in order to bring economic benefit to her household. While Jezebel demonstrates agency, she nonetheless colludes with

systems of patriarchy. This is certainly true for the #Blessed community of young women. They are not engaging in transactional survival sex for basic necessities. Rather they commodify sex in order to satisfy their desire for luxury goods and opulent lifestyles, the 'new needs' of modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Haddad 2018). Their own perceived agency might bring a degree of economic power but it does not bring post-patriarchal transformative liberation to their lives. The #Blessed community remains trapped in econo-patriarchy.

Herein lies the intersectional dilemma for African women's theologies. While women's agency is foundational to all African women's theologies, the #Blessed community shows that not all agencies bring liberation from unjust systems. Furthermore, the agentive actions of these young women also highlight the inadequacies of African women's theologies in engaging the 'liberative' dimensions of transactional sex in contexts of economic disempowerment. African women's theologies are, therefore, not only tasked with undertaking a systematic analysis of the intersection of culture with econo-patriarchy but are obligated to engage the transactional sexual behaviour of young women as they seek to be free of economic disempowerment in a consumer-orientated globalised world.

## Agency re-discovered

Almost 20 years ago, Maluleke (2000) wrote a seminal article in which he mapped the contours of how black and African theology had 'rediscovered' the agency of Africans in the post-cold war and post-apartheid era. Maluleke (2000:22) argued that in exploring the diverse developments in African theology, he is persuaded that it has a unique role to play in acknowledging, valorising, interpreting and enhancing the agency of African Christians in their daily struggles for survival. The emerging paradigm of this time, he suggests, has a number of contours, which include a liberation and/or inculturation dimension. A variety of contours coalesce around a central focus on the rediscovery of African agency that is explored and interpreted, respectively (Maluleke 2000:31). He further argued that it is African women's theology that is 'engaging in the most passionate, the most vibrant and the most prophetic forms of praxis ...' (Maluleke 2000:31). It is here, in African women's theology, that women are expressed as agents who take initiative and resist oppression.

Maluleke further asserted that it is biblical hermeneutics of South African black theologian, Itumeleng Mosala that the most liberative approach to the rediscovery of the agency of Africans is found. For Mosala, suggested Maluleke (2000:33), a liberative theology must emerge from within the black working class and peasantry with an emphasis on all levels of oppression: cultural, political and economic. Maluleke (2000:33) was quick to point out that Mosala does not romanticise either African culture or the poor or suggest that everything black is 'good'. Rather, says Maluleke (2000:33), Mosala significantly emphasised the need for liberative theology to work hard at affecting an 'ideological and theoretical break with dominant ideologies, practices and

discourses'. All too often, says Maluleke (2000:33) drawing on Mosala's work, liberation theologies, 'who despite their genuinely good intentions, nevertheless remain trapped in the ideological and theoretical frameworks of the very oppressors whom they seek to undermine and ultimately dethrone'. This is why, in this article, I call for a careful analysis of the intersection between economic systems and women's agency.

As already indicated, Maluleke asserted that African women's theologies assert particular passion in the quest for the rediscovery of the agency of African women. African women theologians would themselves understand their work to be liberative as they assert the agency of women. They would also claim, with Maluleke, that their work has a unique role to play in acknowledging, valorising, interpreting and enhancing the agency of African Christian women in their daily struggles for survival. Their work has stood against the image of African women as poor, helpless victims in need of support and aid. Instead, there has been a strong tradition within the Circle of foregrounding notions of dignity, strength, resilience and independence. Much of the theologising of the Circle theologians has attempted to show that both patriarchy and culture need to be re-interpreted using feminist cultural hermeneutics and in so doing assert the immense power of women's agency in dethroning notions of 'victimhood' in theory and practice (eds. Dube 2001; Oduyoye 1997; eds. Phiri & Nadar 2006). Where this has not happened, internal critique has taken place with scholars such as Dube (2009) pointing out the need for greater emphasis on stories of independence and resistance.

Earlier, I suggested three broad areas that frame the work on agency by African women theologians. While there are many examples in this body of work, I will only address each area briefly.

The first area focuses on the need for egalitarian relationships with men in order for women to be afforded dignity and respect. Oduyoye (1997:157–171), in *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, argued that language used to describe women both within tradition and society clearly indicates the oppression of women. She supports her arguments showing how the Bible has been interpreted, cultural proverbs and practices used and laws implemented to subjugate women in church and society. Oduyoye (1997:188–207) continued by urging women to act and insist on their right to be in leadership in the church, to re-read the Bible through the lived experience of women and doggedly ensure that women use self-affirming language at all times. This early work of Oduyoye laid the foundations for the theologising of countless other African women theologians. Some of the first collaborative works of the Circle bear testimony to this fact (eds. Kanyoro 1996; eds. Njoroge & Dube 2001; Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992).

The second area indicates that women assert their agency to achieve this egalitarian goal. In so doing, they bring healing

and wholeness to both women and men who are transformed through the process. A particular focus has been on addressing both gender-based violence and the HIV epidemic in bringing wholeness and healing. My own early work on the link between gender-based violence and the HIV epidemic was an attempt to call the church to address the intersections of patriarchy, culture and church practice to ensure the well-being of women (Haddad 2002). It was also a call to women to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse and disenfranchisement within the church. Since then, there have been a number of essays published that address the cultural practices that perpetrate violence against women and are often linked to HIV vulnerability (Ambasa-Shisana 2009; eds. Hinga et al. 2008; Owusu-Ansah 2016). The vulnerability of African women to the HIV infection remains seminal to Circle writings as is demonstrated in a series of collaborative volumes (eds. Chitando & Hadebe 2009; eds. Dube & Kanyoro 2004; eds. Phiri, Haddad & Masenya 2003). Initially, this theologising focused solely on women, but increasingly the role of men and their need to find redemption was drawn into the debate (Fiedler 2017). This deliberate focus on the question of redemptive masculinities was an attempt to address Chitando's (2009) critique that Circle writers have not paid sufficient attention to harmful masculinities and engaged men in the debate.

The third area concerns the inception of the Circle. From the inception of the Circle its member theologians have asserted that agency must be carried out in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. Oduyoye (1997:198–202) has argued strongly that all resistance to oppression must be forged within bonds of sisterhood across the continent. Recognising divisions of race and class, she asserted that 'oppressors and oppressed' exist between women themselves and Circle theologians need to always transcend/transact across these stratifications. In early work, I have suggested that we have the responsibility in all our academic endeavours to 'lift as we climb'.<sup>2</sup> The very notion of a 'circle' is testimony to the agentive work that must be carried out by women theologians in consultation and solidarity with one another.

## Intersectional challenge facing Circle theologians

Yet, there is a new challenge for Circle theologians posed by the #Blessed community of young women. Within this community, women's agency is used to go beyond meeting their daily survival needs to encompass a lifestyle that demonstrates materialistic values of individualism through the commodification of their bodies. As indicated earlier, sex is used for consumption as the #Blessed community seek out the instant gratification of an opulent lifestyle. Their agency embraces non-liberative ideology, practice and discourse, choosing not to

2. A phrase attributed to African American scholar, Mary Church Terrell.

unseat the dominant ideologies of hetero- and econo-patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> African women theologians have yet to respond to the challenge this form of women's agency poses with sustained analysis, leading to liberative theologising that addresses the issues raised by the choices these young women make.

Earlier, I indicated that Mosala asserted that true liberative theology has to make an ideological and theoretical break with dominant ideologies, practices and discourses. For African women theologians to begin to address the challenge posed by a group of young women using agency over and against the values of the Circle, Mosala's assertion is pertinent. The embracing by the #Blessed community of both neo-liberal capitalism in its extreme form and sex for consumption requires theologising that foregrounds both an in-depth class analysis within the changing context of the global world economy and a sexual ethic that is 'indecent' (Althaus-Reid 1999).

As is apparent in the brief survey of the Circle literature on women's agency discussed here, there is little emphasis on the economic dimensions of patriarchy and culture. There has been almost no engagement with the forces of globalisation and its impact on women of Africa. The one exception is the Circle scholar, Dube (2000, 2006). She mounts a scathing critique of the forces of globalisation and their impact on the poor and suggests that for former colonised nations, globalisation is a 'new form of imperialism' (Dube 2006:183). Dube (2006:181) argued that religions participate in globalisation both as a force of collaboration and as a force of resistance. This assertion is premised on the fact that in the first instance Christianity colluded with the imperial forces indicating that Christian religious organisations are not exempt from the forces of globalisation. Collusion with this second wave of imperialism is best expressed in the 'selling of American Christian fundamentalism' where 'young people in particular align themselves with the glamour ... of the prosperity gospel' (Dube 2006:182). In my earlier work on the #Blessed community, I have argued that it is not insignificant that these young women understand that their 'blessing' comes through consumer sex, which meets their individual material wants and fulfils the 'immediacy of desire' (Haddad 2018). These are the hallmarks of the prosperity gospel preached so prevalently in South Africa today.

On the other hand, says Dube (2006:181–182), there is also a resistance to imperial forces. During the colonial period, the emergence of African Independent Churches was a form of resistance where communities hold tightly to culture and tradition and rework colonial forms of Christianity into indigenous expressions. However, it could be argued that the #Blessed community demonstrates quite the opposite. Not only do these young women collude with the imperial forces of globalisation and hetero- and econo-patriarchy, but they

3. Recently, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some women who have been in 'blesser' relationships have chosen to move out of this lifestyle, acknowledging its destructive nature and claiming that they are 'working hard and rebuilding their lives' (Sekudu 2017). Studies are beginning to emerge confirming this anecdotal evidence, see Sprague et al. 2021.

use sex as their gateway to globalised forms of self-gratification.

Of course, 'sex' is notoriously taboo within most theologising, particularly within the African continent. Circle theologians have been slow to theologise sex even though it is central to HIV vulnerability, which is an important concern in their work for the past 20 years. While there has been a recognition that theologising sex is necessary (Dube 2009; Haddad 2013), one of the few theologians to celebrate women's sexuality in her writings in a sustained way is Moyo (2004, 2005). Within the body of Circle work, there has been little intersection between patriarchy and economics and almost no intersection of sexuality with econo-patriarchy. Yet the agency of the #Blessed community of young women poses a challenge to Circle theologians to interrogate the intersectionality of systems of patriarchy and economics in relation to sexuality.

Few theologians have been able to do this. Perhaps the one exception has been the late Marcella Althaus-Reid (2001), a Latin American feminist/liberation/queer theologian. Althaus-Reid (2001:31) argued that both liberation and feminist theologies never truly 'break' with the 'decent' standpoint of the heterosexual understanding of what womanhood means. Advocating for an 'indecent' theology, Althaus-Reid suggested that for women, the material conditions of poverty force this 'break' with the 'decent'. Althaus-Reid speaks of 'unusual poor women' who are also 'unusual Christian believers too' (quoted in West 2018:128). Their *unusualness* renders them 'indecent' as they subvert 'sexual and gender codes in their lives as a result of their struggle for life and dignity' (quoted in West 2018:128). For Althaus-Reid sexuality and economics are 'intimately intersected' within the context of patriarchal power (see West 2018). As I have shown elsewhere (Haddad 2018), the material conditions of poverty and the 'new needs of modernity' have provided the context for the agency demonstrated by the #Blessed community. In the African context, they are 'unusual poor women' and the 'indecent' poor. They subvert sexual and gender codes through their agency. But I argue, as these young women employ their agentive sexuality, they collude with econo-patriarchy and in so doing do not experience post-patriarchal liberation and dignity in their lives.

The challenge facing African women theologians is to interrogate the 'indecent' reality of the #Blessed community of young women. This requires a 'break' with the 'decent' in order to become deliberately intersectional in dealing with issues of sexuality and hetero- and econo-patriarchy in the African context. We need to stand with 'indecent' poor women in order to find ways of re-framing our understandings of women's agency that takes seriously the challenge they pose. Only then will Circle theology move beyond the intersection of patriarchy and culture into the intersection of patriarchy and economics and so into the contextual realities facing all women of Africa, including the 'indecent' poor.

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### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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