"Going through the Fire with Eyes Wide Open": African Women's Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Patriarchy and Sexuality[1]

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

Activists and scholars have shown through research and scholarship that HIV is a gendered pandemic. Attempts to engage this issue, from a gender justice perspective, however, have seen accusations levelled at African women theologians of using Western models to critique essentially African cultural practices. In response to these accusations the authors of this article, conducted empirical research to see if it was possible to find indigenous knowledge which critiques patriarchal practices from within African culture. While neither the concept of "indigenous knowledge" nor "African culture" is monolithic, we chose to study the proverbs, songs and indigenous healing practices of a Zulu community in rural Inanda as a case study, in the hope that a study of this particular community may help to illuminate a larger dynamic. In this article, we explore the ways in which Zulu songs and proverbs critique patriarchy and the ways in which they promote patriarchy. In conclusion, new models of knowledge for the promotion of life in contexts of HIV are proposed.

Introduction

For over a decade now, activists and scholars have noted that HIV is a gendered pandemic (see Gupta 2000). It has been argued that if we do not deal with gender and HIV, we will not be able to make a difference in combating the virus (Phiri 2003: 8). Taking this as their point of departure African women theologians have noted that because Africa has been overwhelmingly committed to heterosexual

marriage that marriage remains the most dangerous institution for women in Africa in the context of HIV (Bediako 1995: 183). Phiri, drawing on Baden and Heike Wach, suggests that "the major mode of transmission in Sub-Saharan Africa is through heterosexual intercourse, with marriage as the major risk factor for any African woman to contract HIV (Phiri 2003: 8). The importance of marriage and the link between marriage and HIV in Africa therefore cannot be dismissed.

Attempts to engage this issue, from a gender justice perspective, have seen accusations levelled at African women theologians for using Western models to critique essentially African cultural practices such as polygamy, lobola, circumcision, etc. in the context of marriage and sexuality. These accusations come from different quarters. For example, at the beginning of every academic year the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal organizes an orientation programme for its postgraduate students. It has almost become routine that after a presentation on the Gender and Religion Programme some African male students argue that African women are not as disadvantaged by patriarchy as feminist scholars have claimed and that particular critique of African culture is actually an imperialist trap.[2] They go further to suggest that to critique patriarchy in African culture, as African women theologians have done, is a tradition they have learned from Western scholarship, which has also had a missionary history of demonizing African cultures and religions.[3]

Contrary to the male students' beliefs that a critique of patriarchy in African culture is a Western imposition, Kwame Bediako, the eminent African theologian, took a different view. While we lament the absence of dialogue with the concerns of African women theologians in Bediako's work, nevertheless, in April 2006 Bediako, as the leader of an NRF project on Indigenous Knowledge and African Christianity, called together a workshop to discuss the current state of the scholarship, and at the workshop a debate around the issue of polygamy began. Kwame Bediako critiqued African women theologians for drawing on Western concepts of gender justice to critique patriarchy in African cultures. Contrary to the students, Bediako did not have a problem with the actual practice of critiquing patriarchy — he had a problem with using Western models to do so. He insisted that if we looked hard enough we would find critiques of patriarchal practices within the African culture itself. Take for example the practice of polygamy. He related that in his own Akan culture it was the duty of his father to find him a wife. While polygamy was allowed in his culture, if a man chose to take a second wife, what he was doing was actually showing disrespect of his father's choice of a bride for him. In a culture that promotes respect of elders, this respect is given precedence over a man's desire to have a second wife, and if he does indeed feel the need to take a second wife, contrary to how polygamous practices have been portrayed as favorable in scholarly literature, it is not something that the community actually looks upon with approval, Bediako argued.[4]

The problem with Bediako's argument is that he had failed to see that African women theologians were already engaged in such critique for over a decade. That Bediako seems to have thought that such work still needed to be taken up indicates that he had not read seriously the pioneering work of African women theologians who had already begun the process of finding indigenous knowledge to critique patriarchy. This is despite the fact that he himself published Mercy Oduyoye's book, *Beads and Strands: Reflections on African Women and Christianity in Africa*, wherein she does exactly this. As Oduyoye has argued in her introduction to Daughters of Anowa, the reason for writing the book was that she believed that "by looking more critically around us, as well as deeper into our history we can be motivated and empowered to create structures that obviate all that we have denounced in patriarchy" (1995: 8). This article then is an attempt to continue this work of finding indigenous knowledge to critique patriarchy within African cultures, while being fully aware that our cultures are indeed steeped in patriarchy and even this research is a subversive exercise.

Recognizing that marriage, particularly the ways in which marriage is expressed in sexual terms, is a dangerous institution for women in African societies in the context of HIV, the aims of this research were to: a) find indigenous knowledge which critiques patriarchy, b) expose indigenous knowledge which promotes patriarchy and c) propose new models of knowledge for the promotion of life in contexts of HIV. Because African cultures are not monolithic, we have chosen to research this topic within a particular culture and community. Below we will describe why we chose this community and what the limitations of our qualitative research endeavour were.

Community, Location and Identity

The participants in our research were a group of women and men (the number ranged between 20 and 30 depending on the day) from rural Inanda in KwaZulu-Natal, mostly indigenous healers.[5] They were all married and they were between the ages of 20 and 65. On average we had an equal distribution of women and men participants. The six workshops took place on occasional Saturday afternoons between May and September 2008. Our aim was to collect their knowledge of Zulu songs, proverbs and wisdom sayings that deal with gender in marriage, in particular, sexuality and polygamy. We chose indigenous healers as opposed to ordinary members of the community because they are perceived to be the vanguards of culture and religion. Hence, they have first-hand knowledge about the resources within the culture.

The research was built on already existing research relationships in conjunction with the Centre for Constructive Theology (hereafter CCT),[6] and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). We, as the principal investigators, were reliant on

the skills and expertise of two Zulu speaking research assistants, Lindiwe Mkasi and Jairos Hlatywayo.[7] Lindiwe was our primary link to the community. As an indigenous healer herself and as one who has worked in previous research partnerships with Isabel Phiri since 1999, she was well placed to provide an entry point into the research community. Jairos, as a PhD student in the Gender and Religion programme working in the area of masculinity, and as a Zulu speaker (despite his Ndebele heritage) was also well suited to help us in this research endeavour. In addition, we included the spouse of one of us, Maxwell Phiri, in the research process. This was a strategic plan for a number of reasons: a) We needed more men in our research team because we had on average an equal number of male and female participants; b) the conservative participants could readily identify with a couple in the research team as opposed to a single woman, especially because our research focus was on marriage; c) Maxwell Phiri speaks Zulu fluently despite the fact that he is not ethnically Zulu.

Isabel Phiri was well known to the community because of her previous research on indigenous healing and gender relations in this community. The close relationship established with Lindiwe for over a decade in similar research endeavours provided an opportunity for continuity of connections, relationships and the further development of research in the field of gender studies.[8]

The original intended role for Sarojini Nadar in this research was not to be directly involved in the fieldwork, but to offer her skills in the fields of gender analysis and philosophical and theoretical evaluations of the findings from the field. However, during the course of the focus group discussions, the participants made it very clear that they wanted to do some form of bible study, to understand biblical perspectives of the relationships between women and men. While this might sound peculiar given that we were looking for "indigenous" knowledge we quickly discovered that indigenous knowledge is a hybrid of factors, and any quest to find a "pure" knowledge is futile.

As Phiri discovered in her previous research with the same community:

> [We] incorrectly assumed that African women religious leaders had nothing to do with Christianity. Through the interviews and participation in rituals we learned that women healers can be divided into two categories. The first category includes women traditional healers who continue in their church membership. The second category consists of women traditional healers who have totally disassociated themselves from Christianity and practice only African Traditional Religion. (2006: 121)

In our group of research participants most belonged to the first category, and were very happy to receive and read copies of the bible in Zulu. Hence, we

decided to respond to their request for bible studies, as Sarojini Nadar had already accumulated vast experience in facilitating community bible studies, and knew that this method was participatory as well as a means to both generate and gather new knowledge (see Nadar 2003: 339-351). While the method required some reflection and modification for this particular group, especially because of the issue of translation, it eventually became a vehicle for gaining new knowledge and expertise both on the side of the researchers and the participants.[9]

We realize that we have taken much effort and space to describe our positions as researchers above. This is because research in Africa on indigenous people has of recent been viewed with much suspicion from African theorists. For example, Olufemi Taiwo, has argued that the theories on feminist research are:

> not equipped to deal with the complexity of the African, nor with any other situation. Talk about Africa's bewildering diversity is one of the real legends of all time. It is quite diverse in its demographic constitution, the cultural practices contained within it, its history, and so on. One assumes that this forbidding diversity will at least have a sobering effect on any researcher interested in truth to approach his or her subject with considerable respect. In other words, any researcher working on Africa will be less prone to generalizations, to asserting uniformities in advance of more adequate knowledge about the peoples and cultures of the continent... One consequence for most areas of life and thought even the most diligent scholar must lament is the paucity of relevant and useful data. But a disinclination to generalize on limited evidence and respect for diversity of African phenomena are rare in feminist theory as applied to Africa. (Taiwo 2003: 48)

We are approaching this research with this sobering interest in truth, and with considerable respect as advised by Taiwo. We are conscious of the dangers of generalizations and have tried as far as possible not to assert uniformities, for we recognize that even within the so-called rural area of Inanda where our research was based, a number of diversities exist from issues of class (some homes had electricity while others did not) to issues of gender (some families were polygamous, while others were not) and even religion (some were Christian, others identified themselves as traditional, while still others identified themselves as both).

Taiwo makes the further indictment that the focus on rural Africa in feminist research has been because the

> appellation fits *a priori* conception of Africa as backward and its people as still mired in stages of evolution that so-called

> developed societies have superseded. In light of this 'rural Africans who speak in 'strange tribal tongues' and 'quaint beliefs and funny cuisines' must be more authentic than the English-speaking, ale-swilling, Hume quoting, Shakespeare-loving, bourgeoisie sybarite of the African city. (Taiwo 2003: 57)

We acknowledge the frustration which Taiwo is expressing. But her arguments preclude the possibility that the researcher may very well be African him/herself and may not be interested in the "exotic" as much as the Western anthropologist may be. What if the researcher speaks a "funny tribal language" too, and eats with her fingers, but nevertheless still reads Shakespeare and has a genuine interest in knowing the values and beliefs of other Africans? Further, we ourselves as researchers discovered "the complexity of rural areas" which Taiwo describes, because Inanda itself was not without the so-called creature comforts of the city, such as electricity and running water. Our interest in Inanda was not because of its rural-ness, but because of the pre-existing relations built over years of research and community partnerships through the work of the Centre for Constructive Theology and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, as indicated above. In addition, we are also aware that we as researchers are not singular constructions, but our identities are vast and varied. Within our research group was a reflection of the diversity of representation of African cultures — Zimbabwe, Malawi and South Africa. Even though we could all lay claim to being Southern African, we were from different ethnic groups, cultures, and backgrounds. Sarojini is South African Indian. Isabel and Maxwell are Malawian Chewa. Jairos is Zimbabwean Ndebele. Lindiwe is a South African Zulu indigenous healer, but is more educated and middle class than the women participants in our research group.

We recognize that our long attempt at sketching our identities in the way we have done may be viewed perhaps as insufficient and smug, as it is now

> commonly understood that identities are fluid and always shifting. But it is clear that such acts are necessary because for instance in Mohanty's case, by foregrounding her position within the category of Third World Women she ensures that the meaning of what she says is not separated from the conditions which produced it. She always acknowledges the differences within Third World women, and this anticipates her definition of Third World women as "imagined, communities of women with divergent histories and social locations." (Nako 2003: 188)

Having declared our locations then, we will attempt in the following section to describe and analyze the ways in which patriarchy, as it manifests itself in the area of

sexuality and the practice of polygamy, is both promoted and critiqued within Zulu culture. We are conscious that what we present can only be a "re-presentation", further complicated by the fact that we have worked through a translator in accessing our information. We do not want to make the same mistakes as some Western feminists who have been derided because when they speak they

> speak simply as women [though they speak as] White middle class women, the meaning of what they say is often misrepresented, misunderstood and taken out of its context as representing all women. And second, when Western feminists take up the course of Third World women they reinforce the subjugation of Third World women by denying them the right to articulate their own problems. (Nako 2003: 188)

Our intention is not to deny the women and men in the communities their own voice — this is why we used research methods, such as focus group discussions and Contextual Bible Studies, that enhance and promote participation rather than simple one-on-one interviews, which require straightforward answers to questions. We also wanted to offer the community a forum to discuss what was important to them. Proceeding with the sensitivity and cautiousness required, we will commence our analysis in the next section through an examination of three focus areas: Traditional Proverbs and Songs, Indigenous Healers and Critical Community Reflection.

Proverbs and Songs

African Theology uses a number of sources which promote engagement and critique of African cultural and religious practice (Pobee 1997: 23-28). One such source which has been identified is proverbs and songs. It has long been recognized by anthropologists and other social scientists that songs and proverbs are a means of constructing and upholding the values which communities want to promote and maintain (see Ndungo 2002). Mbiti has asserted that proverbs are central to African life and thought.

> We find them by the hundreds and thousands in every African people (tribe). They address themselves to many themes and areas of life and knowledge. They are very concentrated in the sense that they put a lot of thoughts, ideas, reflections, experiences, observations, knowledge and even world views, into a few words. (Mbiti 1988: 73)

By asking the women and men to share their proverbs and songs with us, we were asking them to reassign the space of these cultural art forms from the arena

of "sacred space" to an arena of cultural accountability and critique. Hence, the theory of feminist cultural hermeneutics was important for our work. In her ground-breaking work with the same title Musimbi Kanyoro argues at length why it is important for African women theologians to use culture as a serious analytical category, not just by uncritically praising its inherent worth, but by holding it up to scrutiny in the light of gender justice (Kanyoro 2002).

Going through the Fire with Your Eyes Wide Open

During the course of our research a number of songs and proverbs dealing with marriage and sexuality were introduced to us by the participants. While we were intent on finding proverbs which critique patriarchy, unfortunately the first proverb that was introduced to us in our discussion was one which actually promotes patriarchy and a resignation to its destructive power. This proverb was "One goes through the fire with one's eyes wide open." It was used by a woman participant in response to a question from a man in the focus group discussion about whether she could negotiate with her husband to wear a coat (condom) if she knew that her husband was being unfaithful. Her response corresponds with the argument made by African women theologians — that marriage is a dangerous institution for women in the context of HIV. This is because the proverb teaches that even when one is aware of a dangerous situation one goes into that situation willingly. This is confirmed further by the woman's clarification of what she meant. She said:

> I go to the fire with my eyes wide open, I give up my life. The man will say, I paid lobola for you. You are my house. You cannot make me wear a coat [condom]. The laws from outside do not apply in my house.

It is clear that the proverbs are designed to create a sense of resignation to one's situation — this woman uses it in a fatalistic manner with regard to gender. She also had a similar attitude to polygamous marriages. She said:

> I am in a polygamous marriage. I do not ask my husband where he is going or where he is coming from. That is Zulu culture. When he is there I just give him food.

The woman's statement and her employment of the proverb reveals three important aspects of a dangerous marriage, which we wish to highlight. The first is the notion that a wife is "owned," through the practice of lobola. While this is an understanding in many African cultures, it is also not that different in Western cultures, especially those whose laws on marriage are biblically based. The current

use of the ritual of the father walking the bride down the aisle to "give her away," for example, is still uncritically used by many Christian denominations without ever understanding the history of the woman as "a piece of property, handed over by her original owner — her father — to her new owner — her husband" (Besant 1987: 394).

The second issue, which many HIV & AIDS activists and scholars have picked up on in the fight against the spread of HIV, is the inability of women to negotiate for safer sex, in cases of unfaithfulness, because of cultural constraints. As the same woman who used the proverb declared, "As for me, I am married to a womanizer. I see him with another woman, and I ask him about it. He refuses to answer and is not apologetic." This again has to do with the understanding of the ownership of women's bodies by men — an ownership that is not reciprocal or mutual. In other words, while the man owns the woman's body and can make decisions about her body, ranging from what she wears to whether she should have sexual fulfilment, the same does not apply to him — the woman cannot make any decisions about his sexuality or body. This is his right and his preserve, therefore he does not have to answer her, neither does he have to be apologetic. When the woman in the example above describes herself as the "man's house" the understanding is that he completely engulfs her.

An African feminist ethics of sexuality is needed in order to promote safe practices in the context of HIV. As Beverley Harrison argues:

> The moral norm for sexual communication in a feminist ethic is a radical mutuality — the simultaneous acknowledgement of vulnerability to and need of another, the recognition of one's own power to give and receive pleasure and to call forth another's power of relation and to express one's own. The sexual ethic of patriarchy — our present operative ethic — has ownership as its formative value. We are to possess total right of access to and control of another's body-space and the fruits of another's body, if the other is female. A norm of control prevails, which is why so-called marital fidelity really means only sexual exclusivity for the female spouse. (Harrison 1985: 149-50)

Thirdly, there is a depressing fatalism attached to the understanding of marriage. The value attached to marriage is more than the value attached to one's own life. Happiness is perceived as incidental to marriage — it is the woman's duty and life-goal to get married. Mbiti describes it well:

> The woman who is not married has practically no role in society, in African traditional world-view. It is expected that all women get married. So a proverb states: "an ugly girl does

> not become old at home" which means that the looks of a girl should not stop her from getting married. Otherwise this would deny her the role of womanhood. (Mbiti 1988: 74)

The resignation of this woman to her fate of being married lies in this traditional worldview that it is her destiny to get married and to satisfy her husband's needs. Marriage is an essential part of womanhood as argued by Mbiti. What we discovered, as we shall show later, is that depending on one's position a woman could negotiate the marriage space, but in this particular example this space did not exist, as this woman was an ordinary member of the community, not an indigenous healer. As we shall see later, women indigenous healers are able to use African cultural norms to their benefit — in the service of life rather than death.

Do not Come Because My Husband is at Home Tonight

Although the women expressed a resignation to the system of patriarchy within marriage, as expressed through the proverb "going through the fire with eyes wide open," nevertheless we also discovered that the women in marriages which did not allow them sexual pleasure sought this pleasure outside. While the men in the culture may believe that they have control over sexuality through culturally sanctioned practices such as polygamy, women still seek pleasure without such cultural sanctions. This was reflected in one of the songs which said "Do not come because my husband is at home tonight." These covert songs are as dangerous as the idioms which promote patriarchal practices that benefit men's sexuality. Notwithstanding the dangerous ideology promoted by this song, there are also songs that caution against such dangerous practices. For example: *"Anodla nibheke anodla nibheke, amashende ayabulala,"* which means "Choose carefully because multiple partners can kill you." While this song is sung at initiation ceremonies for young people, it can be equally applied to married women through the stark reminder that multiple sexual partners can kill.

Bring Her Home

As was shown above, songs formed an integral part of our research. One of the features and most memorable aspects of our research was spending the afternoons with the community singing and dancing. We had asked them to sing the songs that they sing during the nuptials — songs which men and women sing to each other. While most of the songs reinforced patriarchal beliefs we were able to find songs that both expressed romantic feelings and enforced the protection of women within marriage. One such song that is sung is when the family of the bride to be (makoti) is escorting her to her new home. The song goes like this and is sung by the bride's sisters to the groom:

Wesibali hayi Wesibali mbuyisele ekhaya
Ungambulali
Ungamushayi
Umekwehlula mbuyiseleakhaya-

Brother in law, bring her home
Don't kill her
Don't hit her
If you can't manage her
Bring her home

This song, unlike the proverb, *going through the fire with one's eyes wide open*, is a challenge to the patriarchal belief regarding ownership and gender-based violence within marriage. The sisters of the bride express agency through the song to protect their sister from violence. The song expresses knowledge about violence in marriage but simultaneously acts as a strategy to provide a solution for prevention. In the midst of rejoicing about the wedding, as expressed through the art-form of song and dance, there is also a subtle warning to the brother-in-law and his family that violence toward their sister is not acceptable. The song also provides the assurance to the sister that she does not have to accept violence against her, and that she may come back home.

Notwithstanding the assurance of this song, the group acknowledged that it still remained a shame for the bride to return home. Nevertheless, in the context of HIV,[10] where studies have shown links between violence and the spread of HIV, can songs like these be re-claimed as indigenous resources to overcome the fatalistic idea that marriage is forever, and that a woman has to resign herself to a life of unfaithfulness and physical abuse? Culture, it seems, does provide a way out, but this voice has been lost somewhere. Can the songs be used as an argument to re-claim that voice?

Indigenous Healers

Our second focus area in our quest to find agency within African culture was within the context of indigenous healers. The majority of our participants, both men and women, were indigenous healers. It became clear to us during the course of the discussions that their particular social location, as indigenous healers, provided them with the power to not just negotiate sex, but to refuse it if they suspected that their lives were in danger due to unfaithful practices. They were able to refuse their unfaithful husband's sexual advances if he refused to get tested for HIV because their sexuality belonged to the ancestors, not to their husbands.

As one indigenous healer indicated to us, she was in a polygamous relationship of two women, and the husband decided to take a girlfriend from the city of

Durban. She saw this as him "taking an enemy into the family" in the context of HIV and requested him to go for an HIV test. He refused, and this is her story in her words:

> There was only one decision I took, we were two and my husband found another one in town. When I asked my husband to go and test he refused and he said I am giving him laws. You see that is why I decided that he should stand there and I will stand here [pointing to different places with her fingers]. From 2000 till now [2008] there has been no sex.

The ordinary participants who were not indigenous healers pointed out very quickly that the only reason she was able to exercise this kind of control over her sexuality was because of her position as an indigenous healer. They did not have this luxury. While we were glad to find this agency being exercised by the indigenous healers, we were also aware that strategies need to be adopted to ensure that ordinary women can also tap into this power. Afterall, surely the ancestors are not only concerned with the well-being of indigenous healers, but with the well-being of all women. This is similar to valuing the body, in the Christian understanding, because the body is the temple of God, and this theology is not only applicable to leadership but to all.

Critical Community Reflection — "Things Have Changed"

In cultural studies, the temptation is often to view culture as a static entity, one which adherents to the culture do not question or critique. What we found, however, was that criticism was an important element in the ways in which the participants engaged with culture and cultural idioms. They were not simply passive recipients of such idioms and beliefs, but were also able to see when things did not work. For example, some participants quoted a Zulu idiom "if you eat you must brush your teeth" which is a euphemistic instruction to bath after sex. While some in the group spoke of how this idiom was used to convey the message that bathing after sex prevented HIV, others were quick to point out that this idiom regarding bathing after sex did not work. They drew parallels between this practice and the practice of withdrawal before ejaculation to prevent HIV. As a woman asserted:

> If you have sex and then have a bath it won't help. People used to say when you have sex you must have a bath and you won't become pregnant. We know it is not true, and this is the same now. Withdrawal before ejaculation did not work. It is the same with HIV prevention.

Similarly an idiom about sex as a basic requirement of polygamous marriages was also questioned. The idiom was that "sex in a polygamous marriage is like bread and butter." In response to this, one of the women declared:

> Your life is your life. I cannot accept bread and butter. I cannot allow him to put butter on me if he is having sex outside. Things have changed.

The agency, contestation and critical questioning inherent in the discussions encouraged us to adopt a more social constructionist view with regard to our analysis of the indigenous knowledge in the community with which we were engaging. Even a study on indigenous knowledge in a contemporary smallholder cultivation in Southeast Asia could conclude that "Analysis of this system shows that it is, like many other such systems, neither indigenous nor exogenous but rather hybrid in character and, further, that representations of this hybridity is highly contested by the parties involved" (Dove 2000: 238). The writer argues that instead of critiquing the concept of indigenous knowledge, he preferred to "examine its 'life-cycle' of initial reception and utility followed by subsequent rejection and disutility" (Ibid: 238).

This life-cycle of reception and utility, rejection and disutility was clear in the participants' responses. HIV and AIDS has opened the door for the rejection and disutility of idioms which promote unsafe sex practices in the name of culture. Here it is the critique that promotes life which is given preference, rather than the dominant cultural beliefs and practices which denies it.

Conclusion: Contested Indigenous Knowledge

We return to our initial research question: to what extent is indigenous knowledge capable of providing a critique of patriarchy as manifested through marriage and sexuality, in the context of HIV and AIDS? Through a gendered analysis of three focus areas (proverbs and songs, indigenous healers and critical community reflection) we demonstrated that while there are resources within culture to critique patriarchy, much work remains to be done in harnessing and promoting these resources, which are often dormant or taken for granted. The dominant voices with regard to patriarchy are so loud that we fail to hear the contesting voices from within the culture. While African women struggle to maintain community as a means of identity, we also recognize the importance of the individual worth of women.

What is needed is perhaps an overhaul of such dehumanizing songs and idioms, to be replaced with new and more life-affirming ones for women and men. We end with the words of Mercy Oduyoye, the doyen of African women's theologies, who says:

> The delicate task of evolving a new language, positive myths, and dynamic icons that will project the humanity of women as partners in creation and in community is gigantic and exciting. Perhaps it even intimidates us as African women. But we have the responsibility to begin, to do our part in our generation... With a frank turning to face the old world with its tangled web of oppression, we set about unraveling it. (1995: 107)

This research project was the continuation of this unraveling, which was begun by our foremothers like Oduyoye. It is our hope that this unraveling will give birth to new songs so that no woman will have to go through the fire, whether with eyes open or closed.

Notes

1 Plenary paper presented at the Joint Conference of Academic Societies in the fields of Religion and Theology, in Stellenbosch, South Africa 22 to 26 June 2009. This article is the first in a series of papers and is the result of research conducted as part of a combined research project between the Universities of Oslo and KawZulu-Natal. The title of the project is "Broken Women — Healing Traditions? Indigenous Resources for Gender Critique and Social Transformation in the Context of HIV&AIDS in South Africa." The project is jointly sponsored by the National Research Foundation of South Africa and The Norwegian Research Council. We are grateful for their financial assistance, though all opinions expressed in this paper are our own and do not reflect the views of the research councils.

2 Similarly, Mercy Oduyoye has noted that: "Before and during the Nairobi meeting (1985), African men insisted that liberation as applied to the African woman was a foreign importation. Some even called it an imperialist trap that would do Africa no good" (Oduyoye 1995: 2-3).

3 The resistance to acknowledge the oppressive nature of patriarchy in African culture and religion, however, is not simply a desire to maintain the *status quo* of oppressive patriarchy, but also a deep and inherent mistrust of colonialist forces which tended to demean and demonize African religions and cultures which provides identity to the African people. Several studies of the missionary enterprise in Africa have aptly demonstrated this point (see Sanneh 1988 and Setiloane 1976).

4 Bediako has lamented the fact that "The discussion of polygamy has so often started from an assumption that it is *the* African form of marriage, so that the essential universal challenge of the Gospel concerning marriage has sometimes been obscured" (1995:183). Further drawing on Lamin Sanneh, he has argued "we need to avoid the danger of describing it [polygamy] in such a way that it is made to embody all the ideals of the African past. There was much abuse in the system and its benefits were not always the unmitigated boon claimed." Therefore, not through prompting and prodding from the West, but by assuming its firm and self-assured place within the

history of redemption African Christianity must courageously recognize polygamy as not a peculiarly African form of marriage, but as theologically false way, a mere human contrivance…" (1995:184).

[5] In this study an indigenous healer is defined as a person who has received a calling from his or her ancestors to heal people by the use of traditional medicines. The second category of indigenous healers is of those who use candles, holy waters and or ashes as aides for healing. The selection of the indigenous healers was based on the following criteria:

a) Ethnically Zulu; b) willing to be part of a focus group in the research sessions; c) and willing to sign a consent form. Some indigenous healers were recommended by those that were in our previous studies. The person was approached and invited personally to be part of this study. This method of self-selection of the study sample was chosen after a careful consideration of other selection methods to maximise willingness to participate in the research.

[6] The CCT was established in 1996 by the then Faculty of Theology at the University of Durban-Westville, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa as a positive response to the challenges of transformation and reconstruction in the new South Africa. It now functions independently, and is housed at the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Its objective is to bridge the gap between formal theological education and the practical concerns and the needs of the people of South Africa, through research, advocacy and outreach.

[7] The criteria for choosing the research assistants were based on: a) fluency in the community's first language (in this study it is Zulu and English); b) a sound knowledge and understanding of gender issues; c) a basic training in sexuality, as it relates to lobola, polygamy and marriage in general; d) ability to discuss sexual matters in public, with a frank, unembarrassed but sensitive approach; e) an ability to relate well to people in an understanding, non-judgemental manner; f) sound knowledge of basic facts of HIV transmission and prevalence in KwaZulu Natal; g) basic knowledge about African religion and culture of the Zulus; h) an understanding of and full respect for confidentiality; i) willingness to participate during the whole duration of the study.

[8] A number of publications emerged from this research project (see Phiri 2003, 2005, and 2006).

[9] The Bible study process will be reflected on in the second and third papers generated from this research. Forthcoming: "Adam was made from the soil and Eve was made from a little rib": Can the Creation Narratives Assist in Creating Just Gender Relations in the Context of HIV&AIDS?" and "Rape, Lobola, Polygamy and Compensation: Inter-Religious Resources for Assisting in Just Gender-Relations in the Context of HIV&AIDS."

[10] See Haddad 2002.

Works Cited

Bediako, Kwame. 1995. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion.* Maryknoll: Orbis.

Besant, Annie. 1987. "Marriage: As it Was, As It Is, As It Should Be." In *The Sexuality Debates*, pp. 391-445. Edited by Shiela Jeffreys. New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Denis, Philippe. 2003. "Sexuality and AIDS in South Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 115 (March), pp. 63-67.

Dove, Michael. 2000. "The Life-Cycle of Indigenous Knowledge, and the Case of Natural Rubber Production." In *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspective*, pp. 213-252. Edited by Roy Ellen, Peter Barkes and Alan Bicker. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic.

Gupta, Geeta Rao. 2000. "Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: The What, The Why and The How." Plenary Address, XIIIth International AIDS conference, Durban, SA, July. www.icrw.org/docs/Durban speech.pdf accessed on 18 June 2009.

Haddad, Beverley. 2002. "Gender Violence and HIV/AIDS: A Deadly Silence in the Church." *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, November, 114, pp. 93-106.

Harrison, Beverley. 1985. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Human Rights Watch Africa. 1995. *Violence Against Women in South Africa: The State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape*. Human Rights Watch.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. 2002. *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Nadar, Sarojini. 2003. "Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation." PhD Thesis, University of Natal.

Nadar, Sarojini. 2008. "'Hermeneutics of Transformation?' A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities." *Scriptura* 93, pp. 339-351.

Nako, Nontassa. 2003. "Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the 'Crisis of Representation' in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*." In *African Women and Feminism Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, pp. 45-56. Edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi. New Jersey: African World Press.

Ndungo, Catherine. 2002. "Social Construction of Gender with Special Reference to Gikuyu and Swahili Proverbs." *Fabula*, 43, 1-2, pp. 64-74.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 2002. *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*. Akropong-Akuapen: Regnum Africa.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2003. "African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV/AIDS Era." In *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, pp. 3-20. Edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad and Madipoane Masenya. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2003. "Virginity Testing? African Women Seeking Resources to Combat HIV/AIDS." *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 9, 1 (July), pp. 63-78.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2005. "Peacemaking and Reconciliation: The Contribution of African Indigenous Religious Women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 123, pp. 84-92.

Phiri, Isabel Apawo. 2006. "Dealing with the Trauma of Sexual Abuse: A Gender-based Analysis of Female Traditional Healers in KwaZulu-Natal." In *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, pp. 84-92. Edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri. Maryknoll: Orbis Publications.

Pobee, John. 1997. "The Sources of African Theology." In *A Reader in African Theology*, pp. 23-28. Edited by John Parratt. London: SPCK.

Sanneh, Lamin. 1988. *Translating the Message: Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Setiloane, Gabriel. 1976. *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana*, Rotterdam: Balkema.

Taiwo, Olufemi. 2003. "Feminism and Africa: Reflections on the Poverty of Theory." In *African Women and Feminism Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, pp. 45-66. Edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi. New Jersey: African World Press.

UN Development Program's Swaziland Human Development Report for 2008. http://www.thebody.com/content/news/art48489.html accessed on 18 June 2009.

Vicci, Tallis. 2004. "Gender and HIV/AIDS," Cutting Edge Pack, IDS Bridge, Brighton, In *Facing the Future Together: A Report of the United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa.*