

Journeying with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians on Contextuality (1989–2021)

Christina Landman

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-0738>

University of South Africa

christina.landman2@gmail.com

Abstract

The author describes her journey with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) in the 25 years between 1996 and 2021. This is done in terms of the methodological values of autoethnography, a method to describe and critique cultural phenomena through the author's own experiences; "cultural" referring here to the culture of doing theology from African women's perspectives. The author describes her participation in five of the six Pan-African conferences of the Circle (the first in Accra, Ghana, 1989, is included in the discussion, but was not attended by the author). The article specifically notes developments in the foci of the conferences in general. The author's journeys with the conferences in Nairobi, Kenya (1996); Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2002); Yaoundé, Cameroon (2006); Kempton Park, South Africa (2013); and Gaborone, Botswana (2019) are presented. The author evaluates the Circle's ability to contextualise its theologies in terms of five questions, namely: 1) whether the Circle has been non-reductionist in establishing the causes of contextual patriarchy; 2) whether the Circle has been able to establish a multi-dimensional contra-culture vis-à-vis patriarchy; 3) whether the Circle has placed the binaries of male and female in dialogue with one another; 4) whether the Circle and its theologies have brought healing to a gendered society; and 5) whether the Circle has established partnerships outside its epistemological and social borders.

Keywords: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; Pan-Africanist women theologies; theological contextualisation; African Women's Theologies; gender contra-culture

Introduction, Aim and Focus

The aim of this article is to tell the story—in terms of the methodological insights of autoethnography—of my journey with the Circle of Concerned African Women

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>

Volume 48 | Number 2 | 2022 | #11176 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/11176>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

© The Author(s) 2022



Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Theologians (hereafter the Circle) as a member who has attended and read a paper at five of the Circle's six Pan-African conferences in the 25 years between 1996 and 2021.

The focus of the article is on the ability of the Circle—through its publications—to contextualise itself in a Pan-African setting, with special reference to the South African context.

Criteria for Evaluating Contextuality

The criteria for evaluating contextuality are as follows, and (in terms of autoethnography) come from my own presumptions of what contextual theologies are or should be:

1. Are African women's theologies emergent, that is, are they non-reductionist with reference to causality? Or do they, for instance, point to patriarchy as the only cause of women's pain and low status in society?
2. Have African women's theologies been able to establish a multi-dimensional contra-culture in (South) African societies, both epistemologically and socially?
3. Have African women's theologies adequately explored the dialogical spaces between the gendered binaries of male and female?
4. Have African women's theologies effected healing in gendered societies?
5. Have African women's theologies been able to establish partnerships beyond their own epistemological and social borders?

Method

To accompany my journey with the Circle, I shall make use of the methodological insights of autoethnography as explained by Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017, 1) in their rubric "Autoethnography" in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (Wiley Online Library): "Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')"; the latter referring in this article to the culture of doing theology as African women within patriarchal cultures. The autoethnographer engages in rigorous self-reflection while doing compassionate research, presenting "personal narrative"; "reflexivity"; "compassionate/emphatic story-telling"; and "the researcher as subject" as some of the key notions of autoethnography (Adams et al. 2017, 2–5).

Abbreviated Literary Review

Two dissertations have hitherto been written on the Circle. In 1996, Carrie Pemberton, a British doctoral student, attended the Circle meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, without an invitation to further her research on the Circle. The leadership felt that she did not partner with them in this research, and I was later told that she was asked to leave. She nevertheless finished her doctoral thesis in 2002, entitled *Circle Thinking: African*

Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West (Pemberton 2002)—the Circle distancing itself from this publication, rendering it unusable for this study, which is on the blending of the author’s self-reflection with the reflection of the Circle itself.

In 2017, a Circle member from Malawi, Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, doctorated from the University of the Free State in South Africa, with a thesis entitled *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007* (Fiedler 2017). The thesis describes the history of the Circle internationally, focusing specifically on Malawi, and on the Circle’s contribution to theological education and development locally. This article would have benefited from a similar study being done here in South Africa.

In 2016—a year before Fiedler’s thesis was published—three articles were published in a special issue of *Verbum et Ecclesia*, which evaluated the legacy of the Circle. Like Fiedler, all three of these authors were not South African nationals but, at the time of publication, were attached to the University of South Africa.

Helen Labeodan, then from the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at Unisa, published in 2016 an (entertaining) article entitled “Revisiting the Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Today: A Lesson in Strength and Perseverance” (Labeodan 2016). In this article, she described the main challenge of the founding mothers of the Circle as that of creating a contra-culture in African societies where women were held captive in patriarchy. The aim of the Circle was to enhance this contra-culture through publications, and Labeodan lamented the fact that after the Pan-African conference in Cameroon in 2007, the flow of publications from the Circle had all but dried up, mainly because of problems in being distributed and sold. And indeed, I have observed that the early publications of the Circle are almost unattainable in South Africa, with the Unisa library—the largest in the southern hemisphere—housing one of these publications.

Hazel Ayanga from the same department, in the same year (2016) published “Voice of the Voiceless: The Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians” (Ayanga 2016). The legacy of the Circle for her lay in them giving voice to the voiceless. The Circle did this in its earlier years by creating awareness of the plight of women on the ground, especially as far as HIV and AIDS were concerned, and by creating opportunities for women to undergo theological training. However, she concluded that women were still voiceless and unsafe in public and private spaces. Ayanga, therefore, pointed especially to the huge contextual issues of the time and that the huge challenge of the Circle remained to address patriarchal contexts where, for example, domestic violence reigned.

In 2016 too, Nontando Hadebe (then from the Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology at Unisa) published “‘Moving in Circles’—a *Sankofa-Kairos* Theology of Inclusivity and Accountability Rooted in Trinitarian Theology as a Resource for Restoring the Liberating Legacy of *The Circle of Concerned African*

Women Theologians” (Hadebe 2016). Hadebe called on the Circle to expand its former agenda and become inclusive of all oppressed groups, focusing on oppressed women on grassroots level, but not excluding men as if the latter were a homogenous group of oppressors. Hadebe saw undermining patriarchal cultures through cultural hermeneutics as the main task of the Circle, as it had been from the beginning.

This short survey proves that contextualisation is both necessary to investigate vis-à-vis the Circle, and that such a study has not been undertaken thoroughly. Studies have been done within South Africa pointing to the Circle’s attempts at contextualisation, but not referring specifically to the South African context. It is this gap which this article wishes to fill, although it may only contribute to a drop in the ocean.

South African Feminist “Culture” of the 1980s

As background, a short overview will be given here of how “feminist theology”—as it was called locally in the 1980s—developed as a small sub-culture in theology during the 1980s in South Africa. This will be written from memory within the boundaries of autoethnography, as explained in the above.

In 1980, Simon Maimela was appointed in the (then) Department of Systematic Theology in the (then) Faculty of Theology at Unisa. He was the first Black professor to be appointed at this university, and actually the first Black lecturer outside of the Department of African Languages. Unisa, at the time, was a White, male, Afrikaans-speaking institution and it was against severe resistance that he got an honours course in Liberation Theology installed, which included Feminist Theology. One of his first students was Denise Ackermann.

In 1984, the first conference on feminist theology was held in South Africa under the auspices of the Institute for Theological Research at Unisa. Denise Ackermann, Felicity Edwards and Christina Landman gave papers at this conference, and the other spaces were filled with women who were psychologists and sociologists. There were simply no “feminist” theologians in South Africa at the time. Ackermann was a temporary junior lecturer in Practical Theology, and Landman was specialising in Early and Medieval Church History.

I obtained my DTh in 1987 (Landman 1987). It was very rare for women in South Africa to obtain a doctorate in Theology at the time. My thesis was not on a “feminist theological” theme, but on the investiture struggle of the Middle Ages, which was my field of expertise. At the time, women’s studies were not regarded as an academic topic at all. Nevertheless, Ackermann completed her DTh at the University of the Western Cape in 1990 (Ackermann 1990), giving a feminist theological perspective on the Black Sash, which was a first for South Africa.

In short, by the time the Circle was launched in 1989, there were very few women teaching theology at South African universities, there was almost no training available

for women to study theological women's studies, and women's studies in theology were not at all established as an academic subject locally.

Six Pan-African Conferences of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (1989–2021)

The First Pan-African Conference in Accra, Ghana (1989)

The launching of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians took place in 1989, from Saturday 23 September until Sunday 1 October, in Trinity College of Theology in Legon, near Accra, Ghana. The theme of the conference was “Daughters of Africa, Arise!” The names of the 69 women who attended this conference appear at the back of the publication, which contains the papers delivered at the conference, Bible studies and meditations, as well as the reports of the workshops. This book with the proceedings was published in 1990 as *Talitha, qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, 1989* (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990).

There were only two women from South Africa present; Angelina Swart, head of the Moravian school in South Africa, and Brigalia Bam, who was at the time stationed in Geneva at the World Council of Churches. There were no “White” women at the conference. The conference emerged from the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which restricted its membership, quite understandably for the time, to Black members.

The papers read and workshops held during the conference were published in a report that makes for interesting reading. It deals with a variety of subjects under the broad theme of *Talitha, qumi!* (or “Daughters of Africa, Arise!”), and concentrates on three subjects.

- The first is a critique on both religious and cultural rituals that presuppose that women's blood is impure, leaving women vulnerable in a variety of ways.
- The second is a very pronounced theme which concentrates on single mothers. Four papers are dedicated to the important theme of discrimination against single mothers, that seem rather to be double parents, the fathers not being involved.
- The third sub-theme is on polygyny/polygamy. Oduyoye's positive view on polygyny (in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990, 45) is not always repeated in the papers and the workshop on the theme.

The launching conference, in short, established women as “life-affirming moral agents” (Oduyoye in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990, 14) and proved that “it is erroneous to use the Bible against women” (Tetteh in Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990, 163).

The Second Pan-African Conference in Nairobi, Kenya (1996)

Meeting Mercy Amba Oduyoye

In 1991, the University of South Africa (as my employer) sent me on a study trip to the Netherlands and Germany to study the ego-texts of South African women held in missionary archives in Europe. I agreed with Mercy Amba Oduyoye to come and see her on a specific day during this trip. The only time she had open was a few minutes during her lunchtime. On that day, I travelled by train from a small village in the Schwartzwald in the southwest of Germany to Geneva in Switzerland. It was a trip of five and a half hours one way. I had not known Mercy Oduyoye before but had read her works. I felt that I could not leave Europe without meeting this woman who, for me, was an icon. She graciously, albeit cautiously, agreed to see me for those few minutes.

It was a short meeting, but one that changed my academic life forever.

The Meeting of the Southern and Eastern Zones in Nairobi in 1992

After the meeting, I was graciously invited to meetings of the Circle. The first was in January 1992, when two of the five zones in which the Circle was divided, namely the Southern and Eastern Zones, met jointly in Nairobi, Kenya. The publication that came forth from this meeting in 1996 was entitled *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* by Kanyoro and Njoroge (1996) who, with Mary Getui, coordinated the 1992 meeting.

Out of a total of 25 contributions, eight women from South Africa contributed to “Groaning in Faith.” They were Sharon Potgieter, Angelene Swart, Betty Govinden, Daphne Madiba, Sa’diyya Shaikh, and Nokuzola Mndende, the latter who was pronouncedly an African traditionalist and not Christian. She represented the vision of the Circle to be multi-religious. The “White” South Africans who attended the meeting and contributed to the publication, Denise Ackermann and Christina Landman, were known not as being “White” but as South African gender activists, and as political activists against the apartheid system, which in 1992 was still in full swing. Ackermann nevertheless addressed this outside-inside dilemma of White African women vis-à-vis African women’s theological thinking in this very publication as a diversity-inclusiveness dilemma (Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996, 136–148). Until the 5th Pan-African Conference in 2013 in Kempton Park, South Africa, Ackermann and Landman were, for the most part, the only “White” South Africans invited to attend the meetings, and especially the Pan-African Conferences, of the Circle.

For me, still partially held captive in the theological isolation of South Africa, “Groaning in Faith” was an amazing, liberative book. The paper I read at this meeting was published in “Groaning in Faith” as “A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey: Reading the Bible with Women who are Breastfeeding” (Landman 1996, 99–111). It was based on lectures I gave to women at a theological school in Zambia. Only men were allowed to study for the ministry, and their wives were kept in a special lecture

room to be domesticated into the role of wife of the minister. The women were regarded as “uneducated” and most of them were sitting there, breastfeeding. What I did discover, is that the women were highly informed about the stories in the Bible, including that of the women of the Bible, albeit not in a liberative way. In the article, I suggested 40 lectures based on Bible studies of women in the Bible—to “educate” women in self-worth. Although I was still very much academically situated in the Middle Ages, in which I had just received a doctorate (Landman 1987), this article incidentally blended in with the other articles in “Groaning in Faith.” These articles strongly relied on mother symbols in fighting for ordination and for women to take their rightful place in the “household of God.” These mother symbols for women’s experiences include groaning in labour pains (Njoroge), the role of motherhood in creation itself (Ndyabahika), and the placing of women’s priesthood in relation to nature itself (Getui).

The Johannesburg Cluster of the Southern Zone’s Meeting in 1994

When Brigalia Bam held a Circle meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1994 after becoming the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, I was overjoyed to be invited to this meeting. It was a large meeting of many women, but only four of them had formal theological training—and those four were the four White women attending. Brigalia Bam was understandably not happy about this.

It took many years to establish a Cluster in the north of South Africa. Today there is a Cluster run by lecturers from the Universities of Pretoria and South Africa, the latter being also in Pretoria (60 km north of Johannesburg).

The Second Pan-African Conference in Nairobi in 1996

The second Pan-African Conference, which assembled in the Methodist Guest House in Nairobi, Kenya, from 25 to 30 August 1996, bore the title “Women in the Household of God”—a theme that had been in preparation since the early 1990s. Its proceedings were published the very next year, in 1997, under the title *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God*. Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Oduyoye 1997). The book contains details about what preceded at the conference, and the address list of the 124 women who attended. This included seven women from South Africa, who were the traditionalist Nokuzola Mndende, Christina Landman and Betty Govinden, and four women I had not previously met. Also, in 1997, the papers delivered by women of the English-speaking West Africa Zone prior to the 1996 Pan-African conference, were published under the title *Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God’s World* (Amoah 1997). This confirms the focus of the Circle during the first half of the 1990s: the place of (African) women in the church, world and culture, that is, in short, God’s world.

The paper I delivered at the Second Pan-African Conference in 1996, was only published in 2001, and that in *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women* (Njoroge and Dube 2001). The title of the article is “The Implementation of Biblical Hermeneutics”

(Landman 2001, 83–94). The article at the time did not reflect the position of the Circle on the relation between African women today and women of the Bible. Njoroge, in her introduction to the book (Njoroge and Dube 2001, vii–viii), stated that the Circle did not intend with the book to give voice to the voiceless, since African women had for a long time been giving voice to their experiences through songs and other unpublished practices. Also, Njoroge pointed out that women in the Bible had already voiced their experiences. This view was supported by the inclusion of three extremely powerful Bible studies by Imathu on reading between the lines of Luke’s Acts (in Njoroge and Dube 2001, 27–39); Dube on the five husbands of the Samaritan woman (in Njoroge and Dube 2001, 40–65); and Njoroge on Rizpa’s spirituality of resistance (in Njoroge and Dube 2001, 66–82). My article (Landman 2001, 83–94) argued that the women in the Bible could not assist African women in their quest for equality because these women were invisible, voiceless and ultimately unequal. This is no longer my point of view, and even this article ends with examples of the mixing of the stories of African and biblical women to profile alternative stories for African women. Exposure to the Circle’s thinking has brought growth and insight.

On 13 October 1999, three South Africans were among the 15 guests invited to the launch of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological College in Accra, Ghana, an Institute established by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Fiedler 2017, 127). What would the new millennium hold for the Circle and its members, especially the South Africans?

The Third Pan-African Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2002)

Circle Members and Biographical Projects

During the last decade of the 20th century, and since its launch in 1989, the Circle has concentrated on specific theological disciplines, which were Old and New Testament studies, as well as dogmatics. Little attention was given to church history, although this is a subject of special concern to Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Yet, on the side-line, members of the Circle did attend to biography researching and writing down the (her)stories of women, mostly of women who were not in leadership, probably because there were none others.

In 1995, the anthology “Digging up our Foremothers: Stories of Women in Africa” (Landman 1995) was published. It contains 15 chapters with stories of Christian and traditionalist women in southern Africa. Interestingly enough, five of the 15 chapters were written by men. The book also contains a bibliography of southern African women in theology and religion (compiled by Ina Brand from the Unisa library), as well as a bibliography of archival material on women in the Unisa library itself (compiled by the archivist Marié Coetzee and her colleagues). As editor (Landman 1995), I gave an overview of how religious women had been depicted in South African historiography since the beginning of colonisation in the 17th century. This paints a dismal picture of men portraying a good Christian woman as a nationalist, one that lets men stand on her

shoulders to conquer the “heathen”, is obedient to her husband, and one that promotes the Western culture. A good Black Christian woman, according to these depictions, rejects her culture for Western Christianity (Landman 1995, 3–26).

In 2002, Isabel Phiri and others edited and published “Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa” (Phiri, Govinden, and Nadar 2002) with Cluster, a South African publisher. Seven of the 20 contributions are from South African women—if Phiri was considered to be “South African” at that stage, teaching at South African universities. The South African contributions are especially meaningful and contribute to the body of stories of women on grassroots level building their religions and, at the same time, their communities. I contributed an article “Partners in Black and White—White Women Pastors in Coloured Communities” (Landman 2002, in Phiri, Govinden, and Nadar 2002, 159–180). This, and other essays in this anthology by White women, testify to White women at the time seeking another identity as the one that bound them to the apartheid oppressors.

Postcolonial and Cultural Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Century

The 21st century kicked off with at least two very influential publications by Circle members that let academics talk in different words about women’s studies. The one is *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Dube 2000), after which nobody in theological academia, male or female, could publish on postcolonial interpretations of the Bible without quoting Dube. The second is *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics* (Kanyoro 2002). This book provides the basic epistemological insights for women, and men, to read the Bible, distinguishing what in the Bible is cultural and what is salvation.

Pan-African Conference in Addis Ababa 2002

However, the third Pan-African Conference of the Circle, the first of the 21st century, was neither on biography nor on theory. It addressed (practically and theologically) the HIV and AIDS pandemic and its influence on African women. The theme of the conference was “Sex: Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices.” It was held from 4 to 9 August 2002 in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, and it was attended by 140 women from 25 countries, on invitation only.

Papers delivered at this conference were published in 2003 under the title *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (Phiri, Haddad, and Masenya 2003). Again, it was published by a South African publisher, Cluster, in Pietermaritzburg. Six of the 13 contributions—almost half—were by South African authors. The book follows the (by now) “usual” content and structure, with a Part I on re-reading the Bible, here with reference to HIV and AIDS, a Part II with theological reflections, and a Part III with practical resources for faith communities. My contribution falls under the latter and deals with “Spiritual Care-giving to Women Affected by HIV/AIDS” (Landman 2003, 189–208). The article tells the stories of 20 South African women, of whom 11 were

Black, six were White, two Brown and one Indian. Of them, 14 were “ongoingly underprivileged” and six upper-class. What they had in common was, firstly, their HIV status, which was bestowed on them mainly through rape and unfaithful husbands, and secondly, their need for spiritual caregiving. The article describes the road of counselling travelled with these women of faith.

Conference at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana from 4 to 9 October 2003

More conferences and books followed in the footsteps of the 2002 Addis Ababa Pan-African Conference with a focus on HIV and AIDS, women’s vulnerability in this regard, and the practical theological handling of the pandemic in Africa.

From 4 to 9 October 2003, a conference was organised by Mercy Amba Oduyoye at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana as a follow-up to the Addis Ababa Pan-African Conference, which had taken place the previous year. The papers from this conference were published in a 2004 publication, *People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS* (Oduyoye and Amoah 2004) and published by the Circle in Ibadan, Nigeria. Two South Africans contributed to this book, with Betty Govinden composing liturgical sources for churches to deal with HIV and AIDS (Govindin, in Oduyoye and Amoah 2004, 313–356). The book itself is a valuable resource for churches on how to deal theologically and practically with people affected by HIV and AIDS. It also provides examples of countries and churches combatting HIV and AIDS in Africa.

My contribution is entitled “The Bible as a Source of Healing for Women Affected by HIV/AIDS” (Landman 2004, 267–300). It reflects my conviction at the time that the Circle’s main interest is to re-read the Bible. The article mixes the stories of modern-day women of (South) Africa who were affected by HIV and AIDS, with that of the stories of women in the Bible who experienced healing. It encourages women to move away from “identities of failure” and let themselves be empowered by the stories of healing and meaning in the Bible. I was at the time doing a second doctorate in counselling and spiritual care, doing part-time practical work at Kalafong Hospital in Atteridgeville, then a “township” of Pretoria/Tshwane, the northern capital of South Africa. With permission and the assurance of anonymity, the stories of the women told in this article were retrieved from women who attended the hospital for primary care (with their vital information changed so as to make them not recognisable).

That HIV and AIDS and the voices of African women were an important topic for the Circle, becomes clear in the publication of another book on the topic in 2005, entitled *Cultural Practices and HIV/AIDS: African Women’s Voices* (Amoah, Akintunde, and Akoto 2005), published in Accra, Ghana. By then, the Circle was already planning its next Pan-African conference. And the theme would again be on HIV and AIDS.

The Fourth Pan-African Conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon (2007)

The fourth Pan-African Conference of the Circle took place from 6 to 10 September 2007 at the Yaoundé Faculty of Protestant Theology in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. The theme was “The Girl Child, Women, Religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa.”

I gave a paper at this conference entitled “A Theology for the older, Female HIV-infected Body.” It consisted of the stories of women over the age of 50 who became infected with HIV for a variety of reasons, such as the penopause of their unfaithful husbands, or for treating their HIV positive children without protection. From these stories, a theology was deduced to empower women (specifically from this age group) to understand and overcome what was happening to them. The papers of this conference were not published in book form since previous publications of the Circle were selling poorly. I eventually published this as an article with the same title, “A Theology for the older, Female HIV-infected Body,” in *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* (Landman 2008, 52–67).

Although the papers of this Pan-African conference were not published in a book as before, members of the Circle managed to publish another book on the topic through the World Council of Churches in 2009. It is entitled *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV* (Chitando and Hadebe 2009).

The Circle, as was pointed out by authors in the literary overview, has lost its thrust and has forfeited its purpose to bring African women together in Pan-African conferences and publish the fruits of this.

In six years’ time, the Circle’s next Pan-African conference would move to South Africa.

The Fifth Pan-African Conference in Kempton Park, South Africa (2013)

Conference on Patriarchy and Violence in South Africa (2011)

From 25 to 28 September 2011, the Circle hosted a conference at the Lakeview Lodge in Kempton Park, South Africa. The theme was “God-talk/Biblical Hermeneutics Amidst Pronounced Patriarchies and Violence against Women and Children in Southern Africa.” Gender-based violence in south(ern) Africa has been a contextual issue for long without being discussed, and this conference did exactly that. Cyril Ramaphosa, the present President of South Africa, has during his Covid-19 pandemic addresses to the South African nation from 2020 through to 2022, often mentioned GBV as a pandemic equal to that of Covid-19. A few men gave talks at this conference, and I distinctly remember a session before the Yaoundé conference when men, such as Tinyiko Maluleke and Nico Botha, were invited to talk with the women on masculinities. I delivered a paper at this 2011 conference on “Negotiating Masculinities in a Congregation Living with HIV and AIDS,” taking as the research population people

living in Sakhelwe in Dullstroom (in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa). This “township” is poverty-stricken with 89% unemployment. Although it is mainly women who are employed—albeit in lowly paid jobs such as domestic workers and waiters—a strongly patriarchal culture prevails, leaving women vulnerable to HIV infection and domestic violence.

South African Women Theologians/Theologies in 2012

What was the stance of African women’s theologies at the time of the Pan-African conference in Kempton Park coming up?

On 22 June 2012, Beverley Haddad, a woman theologian from the University of KwaZulu-Natal on the east coast of South Africa, gave a paper on this at the Joint Conference of Academic Societies in the Fields of Religion and Theology, which was held on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She noted 10 characteristics and foci of women’s theologies in South Africa: 1) cultural hermeneutics; 2) storytelling; 3) the Bible as central source; 4) a communal theology; 5) theological and social advocacy; 6) a liberation trajectory; 7) the intersection of gender with societal issues; 8) a multi-disciplinary intention; 9) an interfaith dimension; and 10) an emphasis on subjectivities and particular locations. Haddad furthermore presented a list of seven South African woman theologians whom she regarded as leaders in the field. Apart from herself, she mentioned Sarojini Nadar, Miranda Pillay, Madipoane Masenya, Isabel Phiri (although a Malawian citizen), Christina Landman, and Denise Ackermann. Although the list may not be comprehensive enough, it pointed to the presence of Indian, Black and White women in senior academic posts at South African universities.

Academic Conference on Gender Studies at the University of Johannesburg (2012)

Six weeks later, on 16 August 2012, I gave a lecture at an exclusively academic conference with the theme “Gender Studies at the Interface of the Humaniora” at the University of Johannesburg. My paper was entitled “The Failure of Feminist Theology and the Rise of Women’s Theologies in South Africa (1982–2012)” (Landman 2012). The paper argued that feminist theology, as it has been done by a few White theologians at South African universities, has no future locally and has been replaced by women’s theologies such as that produced by the Circle. My recommendations for the future of these studies were that: 1) there should be a shift from victimhood to agency in women theologians’ work; 2) women theologians should form partnerships, also with male theologians, to issue an invitation to the responsibility of gender abusers; 3) there should be a movement towards a type of “post-feminism” or “post-womanism” to theologies that were non-reductionist and non-essentialist; and 4) that there should be a regression of gender identity in favour of multiple identities (Landman 2012).

The immediate future showed that this was not the agenda of the Circle to move beyond a focus on women as victims, but that the Circle was to continue theologically in

addressing social issues with re-readings of the Bible and by criticism on cultural practices that victimise women.

Pan-African Conference in Kempton Park, South Africa (2013)

This fifth Pan-African Conference of the Circle in South Africa, needless to say, was attended by many South African women, Black, Brown, Indian and White. The Circle's traditional funds were restricted, and attendance was not by invitation only. Anyone could attend who paid for herself. By now, 20 years after Brigalia Bam called the women of faith together in Johannesburg, which is situated next door, there were many Black and White women professors at South African universities who attended this conference. I distinctly remember as present Prof. Madipoane Masenya, who was organising the conference, and (the late) Mary-Anne Platjies-Van Huffel, who in 2019 was the first Black woman to become a full professor at the Theological Faculty of the University of Stellenbosch in the south of South Africa. Beverly Haddad also attended.

This fifth Pan-African Conference was held from 7 to 11 August 2013 at the Lakeview Lodge in Kempton Park, the same place where the 2011 conference was held. The theme was "Women's Space in Faith Communities."

I presented a paper on "Women's Space in the Church: The Case of Dullstroom-Emnotweni." This was based on research done in rural Sakhelwe, the then "township" of Dullstroom, and the reluctance of women to take on leadership in the church because of cultural reasons. Because the Circle has not published the papers of this conference, this paper was published as "Safe Spaces for Women in the Church: The Case of Dullstroom-Emnotweni," in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (Landman 2013, 169–184).

It is difficult to evaluate this conference. I saw women in university positions reading their papers from articles they had already published; and since women's theologies had by then become an academic subject, I also saw (White) women flying in to give a paper, and immediately flying back, simply to attach their names to the Circle. Had the Circle lost its sisterhood and its initial dynamic of publishing academically in the name of the Circle?

The next Pan-African Conference was in Gaborone in 2019, where the 30 years of the Circle's existence were celebrated. Was the Circle revitalised?

The Sixth Pan-African Conference in Gaborone, Botswana (2019)

The sixth Pan-African Conference of the Circle was held in Gaborone, in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana, from 1 to 4 July 2019. It was funded mainly by research funds, namely the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (of Botswana), as well as the Global Fund for Women. It occurred in a distinctively academic atmosphere, and

88 papers of an academic nature were delivered. There were only about 10 South Africans presenting, but they represented Black, White and Indian, male and female.

The Circle also celebrated its 30th year of existence (1989–2019) and during a gala dinner evening, many awards were given to women in the Circle who had served the Circle academically over the years. I received a humble reward for profiling African women in the academic subject of church history. I regarded it as an acknowledgement for me as an insider.

The theme of the conference was “Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Religious Imagination” with an obvious focus on ecology, or rather, ecological theology. I gave a paper together with a doctoral student of mine, Sibiziwe Shumba from Zimbabwe. It was a case study on women’s ownership of land in Zimbabwe, and was published the next year as “Religion and Gender Policy Implementation in Zimbabwe: Women’s Access to Land Ownership in Gwanda District” in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (Landman and Shumba 2020, 1–15).

However, after the Pan-African Conference in Gabarone, the Circle started to publish the papers delivered there prolifically. Sun Press, in the south of South Africa, published several of these post-conference books, of which I shall mention only two here:

- *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Mission* (Daniel, Kebaneilwe, and Savala 2020).
- *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions* (Matholeni, Boateng, and Manyonganise 2020).

The first of these, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Mission*, was launched on 26 July 2021 at a Zoom meeting. One of the many plus points of the book is that it addresses the cultural stereotypes that keep women from land ownership. The book acknowledges African women’s knowledge of plants and trees, and African women’s methods of storytelling as sources for an accountable relationship with the earth. This book is to the credit of the publication history of the Circle.

The book is dedicated to me as a founding member of the Circle. For me, this honour was almost beyond comprehension. Since the 1990s, I have been enriched and inspired by the amazing vision of Mercy Amba Oduyoye to bring women theologians from all parts of Africa together to talk, listen and publish. From the start, South Africans (Black and White) were incorporated into this vision and taken out of the isolation inflicted on them by apartheid. This was one of the many incredible achievements of the Circle.

Developments in the Foci of the Circle and its Theologies

In overview, the Pan-African Conferences of the Circle present as follows:

Table 1: Overview of the Pan-African Conferences of the Circle

	Year	Place	Theme	Chair chosen
1	1989	Accra, Ghana	Daughters of Africa, Arise!	Mercy Amba Oduyoye
2	1996	Nairobi, Kenya	Women in the Household of God	Musimbi Kanyoro
3	2002	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	Sex: Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices	Isabel Apawo Phiri
4	2007	Yaoundé, Cameroon	The Girl Child, Women, Religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa	Fulata Lusungu Moyo
5	2013	Kempton Park, South Africa	Women's Space in Faith Communities	Helen Adekunbi Labeodan
6	2019	Gaborone, Botswana	Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Religious Imagination	Musa W Dube

The themes of the consecutive conferences do not necessarily reflect the shift in foci of Circle meetings. According to my observations over more than 25 years, there was never a complete shift away from the initial focus of the Circle, that is, to re-read sacred scriptures and to critique cultural practices that were by nature patriarchal. Cultural hermeneutics became an important method in this research and presentations.

From the third Pan-African Circle conference in 2002, the focus was on societal issues that threaten (African) women, specifically targeting HIV and AIDS. Female genital mutilation was part of this discussion. During this time, biographical studies on women of faith were published by Circle members, and some attention was given to the lack of space for women in ecclesiastical leadership (Kempton Park Conference 2013). However, the main focus of the Circle at the last conference (Gaborone Conference 2019) remained on addressing societal problems. These problems threatening society, and especially its female members, shifted to ecological issues, with recent publications by the Circle focusing on Covid-19, which was not prevalent at the 2019 conference. An example is “A Time like no other: Covid-19 in Women’s Voices” (Hadebe et al. 2021), published by the Circle itself.

Evaluating the Contextuality of the Circle and its Theologies

As indicated in the introduction to this article, five categories have been developed by the author to evaluate to what extent the Circle and African women’s theologies have become part of the context of specifically the South African theological scene. At the end of this study on the history of the Circle, I shall now attempt to give short, preliminary answers to the following questions:

1. Are African women's theologies emergent, that is, are they non-reductionist with reference to causality? Or do they, for instance, point to patriarchy as the only cause of women's pain and low status in society? At this stage, it seems that the Circle is not ready to move beyond patriarchy as the main reason for women's oppression. The argument, as expressed in papers at Pan-African conferences, is that women have not yet found their rightful space in the church/mosque/temple as well as in academia, and that the playing field is not yet even.
2. Have African women's theologies been able to establish a multi-dimensional contra-culture in (South) African societies, both epistemologically and socially? As numerous South African participants to Circle conferences have pointed out, there is no contra-culture in South Africa which treats men and women equally. The gender-based violence pandemic bears testimony to this.
3. Have African women's theologies adequately explored the dialogical spaces between the gendered binaries of male and female? The Circle has, at least twice, organised sessions to which male theologians were invited to discuss the relationship between women's oppression and forms of toxic masculinity. However, the dialogue between female and male theologians has not started in earnest.
4. Have African women's theologies effected healing in gendered societies? The Circle and African women's theologies, it seems, are still tackling the healing of women, which is seen as a massive and incomplete task. The healing of women in relationships with men has not been addressed yet, and neither has the necessity of this been discussed.
5. Have African women's theologies been able to establish partnerships beyond their own epistemological and social borders? During the past 30 years, the Circle and its theologies struggled bravely to survive with the help of ecumenical bodies, lately turning to non-religious bodies for research funding. What other partners does the Circle need to expand not only in numbers and visibility, but also epistemologically?

Conclusion

In this article, I have described my journey with the Circle in the 25 years between 1996 and 2021, using the methodological insights of autoethnography. I have endeavoured to describe the contributions of African women's theologies as expressed in the Circle's Pan-African conferences. I have indicated how the foci of the Circle have shifted—and not shifted—in this time and referred especially to how the re-reading of holy scriptures and cultural hermeneutics in later years were applied to societal issues, such as HIV and AIDS, the destruction of the earth, and Covid-19. The Circle and her theologies have made inroads into the South African society ever since the time (Black, Brown and White) South Africans were invited to participate in Circle activities, thereby assisting women who were locked down in apartheid and male theologians in meeting with the views of Pan-African women theologians. The establishment of an inclusive contra-culture in the highly genderised societies of South Africa is, however, still on the cards.

References

- Ackermann, D. 1990. "Liberating Praxis and the Black Sash: A Feminist Theological Perspective." Unpublished DTh thesis. University of the Western Cape.
- Amoah, E. (Ed.). 1997. *Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God's World*. Accra, Ghana: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Amoah, E., D. Akintunde, D. Akoto (Eds). 2005. *Cultural Practices and HIV/AIDS: African Women's Voices*. Accra, Ghana: Sam-Woode.
- Ayanga, H. O. 2016. "Voice of the Voiceless: The Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37 (2): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1580>.
- Chitando, E., and N. Hadebe (Eds). 2009. *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV*. Geneva: World Council of Churches.
- Daniel, Seblewengel, Mmapula, D. Kebaneilwe, and Angelina Savala, (Eds). 2020. *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Mission*. Sun Press.
- Dube, M. W. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.
- Fiedler, R. N. G. 2017. *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007*. Malawi: Mzuni Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh8r2j5>.
- Hadebe, N. M. 2016. "'Moving in Circles'—a *Sankofa-Kairos* Theology of Inclusivity and Accountability Rooted in Trinitarian Theology as a Resource for Restoring the Liberating Legacy of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37 (2): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1573>.
- Hadebe, N., D. Gennrich, S. Rakoczy, and N. Tom. 2021. *A Time like no Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices*. Johannesburg, South Africa: The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 227.
- Kanyoro, M. R. A. 2002. *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*. Pilgrim Press.
- Kanyoro, M. R. A., and N. J. Njoroge (Eds). 1996. *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*. Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers.
- Labeodan, H. A. 2016. "Revisiting the Legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today: A Lesson in Strength and Perseverance." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37 (2): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1586>.
- Landman, C. 1987. "Skrifgebruik in die *Tractatus de regia potestate et sacerdotali dignitate* van Hugo Floriacensis." Unpublished DTh thesis. University of South Africa.

- Landman, C. (Ed.) 1995. *Digging up our Foremothers*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Landman, C. 1996. "A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey." In *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 99–111. Nairobi, Kenya: Action Publishers.
- Landman, C. 2001. "The Implementation of Biblical Hermeneutics." In *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, edited by Nyambura. J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, 83–94. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.
- Landman, C. 2002. "Partners in Black and White—White Women Pastors in Coloured Communities." In *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, 159–180. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.
- Landman, C. 2003. "Spiritual Care-giving to Women Affected by HIV/AIDS." In *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad and Madipoane Masenya, 189–208. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.
- Landman, C. 2004. "The Bible as a Source of Healing for Women Affected by HIV/AIDS." In *People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, 267–300. Ibadan, Nigeria: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Landman, C. 2008. "A Theology for the older, Female HIV-infected Body." In *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 37 (1): 52–67.
- Landman, C. 2012. "The Failure of Feminist Theology and the Rise of Women's Theologies in South Africa (1982–2012)." Paper read at a conference on gender studies at the interface of the Humaniora, University of Johannesburg, 15–17 August 2012.
- Landman, C. 2013. "Safe Spaces for Women in the Church: The Case of Dullstroom-Emnotweni." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39 (Supplement): 1–15.
- Landman, C., and S. Shumba. 2020. "Religion and Gender Policy Implementation in Zimbabwe: Women's Access to Land Ownership in Gwanda District." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 46 (2): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/7246>.
- Matholeni, N. P., Boateng, G. K. and Manyonganise, M. (eds.) 2020. *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African indigenous religions*. Stellenbosch, SUN PRess, doi:10.18820/9781928480730.
- Njoroge, N. J., and M. W. Dube. 2001. *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.

- Oduyoye, M. A. (Ed). 1997. *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God*. Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Accra-North, Ghana: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Oduyoye, M. A., and E. Amoah. 2004. *People of Faith and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- Oduyoye, M. A., and M. Kanyoro. (Eds). 1990. *Talitha cumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians, 1989*. Ibadan: Daystar Press.
- Pemberton, C. 2002. *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047401315>.
- Phiri, I. A., D. B. Govinden, and S. Nadar. 2002. *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.
- Phiri, I. A., B. Haddad, and M. Masenya. 2003. *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications.

Online Reference

- Adams, T. E., C. Ellis, and S. H. Jones. 2017. "Autoethnography." In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (Wiley Online Library), first published 01 August 2017. Accessed February 10, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>.