‘Mama I Can’t Breathe!’: Black/African Women of Faith Groaning for Social Justice and Gender Equality

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Abstract

This article explores some residual entanglements of colonialism, Christianity, and Afro-western engagement in Africa by using the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police and his cries for “breath” and “mama” as a framework for examining the following. First, we argue that one way in which the repercussions of the transatlantic slave trade remain evident in Africa is the continued police brutality and dehumanization of African citizens. Secondly, with the invocation of “mama,” we consider the plight of African women and colonial/postcolonial Christianity, challenging the African church’s silence on social justice issues, and complicity in the exclusion/oppression of women. We call the church to reckon with its silence, and we offer a corrective towards

constructing a theological and missiological response to our cries for breath. While this article is based on African feminist reflections, it invites global participation and indicates wider implications for social and gendered justice.

Keywords

African women – breath – gender – racial and social justice – patriarchy – colonial – postcolonial – Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

1 Introduction¹

In this article, we reflect on the meaning of breath as life, using the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of police, and his cry for breath and mother, as a framework from which to firstly consider the senseless deaths of countless African citizens at the hands of violent post-colonial African police and government forces, and secondly, to focus our attention on the ways in which African women suffer the double injustice of racialized as well as gender-based violence and discrimination. We consider the lasting colonial and missiological legacies at play here, engaging these issues in the context of a largely Christian continent that is also defined by violence, corruption, police brutality, and preventable deaths caused by disease, violations of human rights, and a lack of gendered justice. Furthermore, writing in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are even more sensitized to the desperate need for “breath,” as well as the ways in which this pandemic has similarly revealed and exacerbated gender-based violence and discrimination against African women and girls.

In considering the role of African church in addressing these issues, as well as addressing its complicity in maintaining what are in some cases an oppressive status quo, we draw particularly from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. This paper likewise draws from recent interviews with selected African women theologians, as well as relevant current events. Finally, we bring our perspectives and lived experiences as African women to bear on our reflections here, while at the same time inviting men and women

1 This article is inspired in part by a short reflection by Musa Dube, “Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Hear the Cry: ‘Mama, Mama ... I Can’t Breathe!’” *Our Voices: EMS Women’s Network* 2020, 202:16–17. A slightly longer version with the same title may be found published online by *Oikoumene: World Council of Churches*, 09 June 2020, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/circle-of-concerned-african-women-theologians-mama-mama-i-cant-breathe>, accessed on November 1, 2020.

everywhere to stand with us in identifying, confronting, and rooting out these issues of systemic discrimination and dehumanization against African and African diasporic citizens.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was created under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Ghana in 1989. Within a post-colonial context, the Circle firstly aimed to address the dearth of writings by African women on theology, religion, and culture. It secondly aimed to interrogate how various religious traditions, texts, and interpretations impacted African women, particularly the ways in which some of these traditions denied them liberation and fullness of life. This interrogation was not limited to religious texts but also included issues of economics, health, education, and many more issues that negatively impacted women, or even led to their deaths. The Circle continues to shed light on these challenges, particularly through their writing and activism.²

In a volume entitled “*Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women*,” the Circle reflects on theology through the lens of culture (Njoroge and Dube 2001). Calling out injustices in church and society as a sinful betrayal of the vision of Jesus, these African Christian women see their task as a prophetic one, unmasking and challenging such sinful practices and unjust structures. They argue that women across the African continent continue to struggle with the hegemony of patriarchal systems, which they describe as a destructive powerhouse, marked by systematic and normative inequalities, with roots both in western missional Christian structures, and also in African religious traditions (Njoroge 1997:81). In their writing and mission, the Circle continues to challenge the forces of death, the powers of patriarchy, and the powers of colonial and post-colonial exploitation.

2 See, for example: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Mercy Amba Oduyoye & Musimbi Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Grace Wamue and Mary Getui, *Violence against Women* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996); Isabel Phiri, Beverly Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya, *African Women, HIV & AIDS and Faith Communities*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003); Mercy Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, eds., *People of Faith & The Challenge of HIV/AIDS* (Ibadan: Sefer, 2004); Musa Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004); Elizabeth Amoah, Dorcas Akintunde and D. Akoto, eds. *Cultural Practices and HIV/AIDS: African Women's Voices* (Inbadan: Sefer, 2005); Isabel Phiri and Sarojin Nadar, eds., *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006); Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, “African Women's Theologies,” in *ISG 46: African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. by Diane Stinton (SPCK, 2012):90–100; Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler, *A History of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 1989–2007* (Mzuni Press: Malawi, 2017).

Therefore, with the Circle's focus in mind, and as African women ourselves, in this article we likewise wish to call out some of the structural injustices that we see in our communities, arguing that they are legacies of racialized colonial and missional practices, while challenging the silence of the African church and calling for faith communities to rise up and respond.

2 Colonialism, African Police Brutality, and the Dehumanization of Black Bodies

George Floyd's murder at the hands of a White police officer shocked the world. Protest movements erupted globally, with various groups seeking justice for issues of social, racial, and gender discrimination. While this started in the US, it quickly spread across the transatlantic world (Garcia 2021; Parsitau 2021b:138). Highlighting the impact of Floyd's murder on the African continent, for example, Ghana's president, Nana Akufo-Addo, sent condolences to Floyd's family, while adding his name to the wall of the Diasporan African Forum at the W. E. B. Du Bois Centre in Accra (Ohene 2020).

Floyd's choking last words – "I can't breathe!" "Everything hurts!" "Please!" – were all painful to watch and hear. However, his cries for his late mother were particularly painful: "Mama! I can't breathe! Mama, I love you! I can't do nothing!"³ This primal and helpless cry for "mother" was one that surely struck a nerve with most, though perhaps "even more painfully so for Black/African women/mothers broadly conceptualized, who are so acutely aware of the violence meted out against Black bodies of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and daughters while themselves facing the dual 'asphyxiation' of racial and gender-based violence and discrimination" (Parsitau 2021b:138; see also Dube 2020). But we will return to the mothers shortly.

2.1 *George Floyd's Murder and African Responses: Postcolonial African Police Brutality*

We would argue that one reason for this global reaction to Floyd's death is that it struck a dishearteningly familiar chord for many. At the same time, the combined brutality and casualness of the filmed footage shocked the wider and often unaware world's attention to the reality that the killings of African American people fits into a long transatlantic historical pattern of racial

3 For transcripts, see for example, "New Transcripts Details Last Moments for George Floyd," *The New York Times*, 01 April 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/george-floyd-body-camera-transcripts.html>, accessed on June 1, 2021.

violence meted out against Black bodies, with roots in the transatlantic slave trade. Though as Sarojini Nadar and Megan Robertson remind us, it is also important to remember that “[w]hile Floyd’s murder sparked widespread outrage and protests, countless Black women ... received less media coverage and slower judicial responses” (Nadar and Robertson 2021:8).

To this end, the brutality exerted by the American police officers against Floyd resonated deeply on the African continent, with the rampant and brutal murder of young African men and women at the hands of post-colonial police forces, tragic injustices that are so common across scores of African countries but which rarely draw serious outrage anymore. It is helpful to consider a few examples here.

On 27th March 2020, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew as part of his government’s measures to contain the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic, with the Kenyan police tasked with enforcement of the rules. With this authority, the police unleashed unimaginably brutal force and violence across the country, which led to many deaths in Nairobi and other parts of the country. Indeed, television outlets and social media broadcast images of police teargassing a crowd of people lined up at a ferry to return home from work – *two hours before the curfew took effect* – and subsequently “beating them with batons and gun butts kicking, slapping and forcing them to huddle together or lie on top of each other.”⁴

Another example: in early August 2021, the police brutally murdered two brothers, Benson Njiru (22) and Emmanuel Mutura (19) on their way home from work, allegedly just past curfew. In the ensuing demonstration by angry local residents, another person was also shot and killed by the police.⁵ The killing of these two brothers by the police has caused tremendous outrage in the country. In an emotional burial ceremony, attention focused on the young men’s mother, who was completely crushed by this senseless murder of her young sons. Images of this grief-stricken mother were heavily circulated on social media, drawing public outrage and calls for justice, such that President Kenyatta demanded a full report on their murder.

Similarly, in South Africa, amidst strict local lock-downs in 2021, Nadar and Robertson reflected on the violent murder of Collins Khosa, killed by soldiers from the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) (Nadar and

4 See “Kenya: Police Brutality During Curfew,” *Human Rights Watch*, 22nd April 2020 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/kenya-police-brutality-during-curfew>, accessed May 5, 2021.

5 See “Curfew deaths on the rise in Kenya as family loses two brothers,” *Rédaction Africanews with AFP* <https://www.africanews.com/2021/08/14/curfew-deaths-on-the-rise-in-kenya-as-family-loses-two-brothers/>, accessed on May 5, 2021.

Robertson 2021:9). These soldiers, like the Kenyan police, were trying to enforce curfew rules and maintain order, but used shockingly excessive force in doing so. Likewise, in Uganda,⁶ Nigeria,⁷ Ghana, and many other African countries, African police brutality against African citizens, both within the unusual contexts of the Covid-19 lockdowns and at other times, has attracted national and international outrage; yet little is done about it.

The repercussions to Floyd's death were felt in other ways as well. For example, a group of youth in Kibera, a large informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, painted a picture of George Floyd alongside of pictures of other young men from the Kibera informal settlements who had died in the hands of the police (Gikandi 2020). The young people used the occasion to protest against systemic injustices they face in their own dehumanizing context, including frequent harassment by the police, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, extremely hard living conditions, and bad governance, among many others. They carried placards with the names of victims of police brutality, shouting slogans such as "Stop killer cops," "Save our future," and "Stop brutalizing us!" The demonstrations were a sharp focus on police accountability and discrimination against poor, young, vulnerable men in Kenya. Like Floyd, they, too, are feeling choked by all of these oppressions; while African women and mothers likewise grieve their inability to prevent this brutality.⁸

2.2 *Looking Back: Colonial Police Brutality*

This history of police violence across the African continent requires further thought. While in American contexts, we frequently hear about police violence as being racialized, with White officers exercising excessive and even lethal force against Black citizens, the situation in Africa appears different on the surface, with Black police enacting violence against Black citizens. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage deeply with the history of colonial policing practices in Africa, or the roots of racialized police violence in the

6 See, for example, "Uganda: Events of 2019", <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/uganda>, accessed on May 5, 2021.

7 See, for example, Allwell Uwazuruike, "#EndSARS: The Movement Against Police Brutality in Nigeria," Harvard Human Rights Journal, Online Journal 12 November 2020 <https://harvardhrj.com/2020/11/endsars-the-movement-against-police-brutality-in-nigeria/>, accessed on May 5, 2021.

8 For further discussion, see Romain Houeix, "After the death of George Floyd, Africa mobilises against police violence," *France 24*, 13th June 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200613-after-the-death-of-george-floyd-africa-mobilises-against-police-violence>, accessed on May 1, 2021.

US, it is important to briefly consider the historical background of policing in Africa under colonial rule, as it sheds light on current circumstances.

Taking the example of Kenya, during British colonial rule, the police served the interests of the colonial administration rather than upholding the interests of the general public. In his essay on “The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa,” Killingray gets right to the point in reminding us that “effective colonial control rested on two basic pillars: firstly, the maintenance of law and order to uphold the authority of the administration; and secondly, the collection of adequate revenue with which to finance the running of the colony” (Killingray 1986:411). Furthermore, “the colonial state acted with impunity in all aspects of life. As various studies have demonstrated ... colonialism was based on violence. No colonial power consulted Africans as to whether or not they wanted to be colonized. Brute force was required first to control the population and second, to impose the will of the colonial powers” (Muiu 2010:1311–1312).⁹ As a result, “a culture of ‘them’ vs. ‘us’ developed. ‘Them’ in this case referred to all colonial institutions – which were alien as well as tools of exploitation and oppression. ‘Us’ comprised the majority of the people who were exploited by these institutions” (Muiu 2010:1312).

Evaluating the legacies of colonial policing in Malawi, John McCracken argues that soldiers and policemen have been given far less scholarly attention than, for example, African clerks or Christian leaders; “but it would be rash to assume that they were less important. As the frontline troops in the struggle to uphold the authority of government, these African intermediaries played a crucial role in sustaining imperial control at the cheapest possible cost. Through their employment, the state was able to ensure that the hut tax was paid, labor coerced, workers disciplined and European property protected” (McCracken 1986:127). Similarly, “the police of Ghana are a colonial creation. The style of policing during colonial rule was militaristic and focused on protection of the colonial state and its mission of extracting raw materials” (Tankebe 2013:576). While lacking a strong sense of popular legitimacy, “the colonial police [in Ghana] relied on the projection of fear, intimidation, and brute force to establish and maintain security”, a model that was “transferred to the postcolonial period, as the police became a patrimony of the state and political elites” (Tankebe 2013:576–77).

9 For further discussion, Muiu directs us to the following, for example: UNESCO *General History of Africa* Eight vols. Paris: UNESCO 1989–1999:7; Claude Ake, *A Political Economy of Africa* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1981); Claude Ake, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA Books, 2000); and Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

One final point to consider here which is particularly relevant to our discussion is that within early colonial rule, there was often concern over issues of "performance" and "trustworthiness" among indigenous police forces. While the colonial government needed this supply of cheap labour to ensure the safety of colonial economic interests, they were also concerned as to whether these indigenous security forces could be sufficiently tough within their own communities. An example from 19th century Ghana illustrates this point: the colonial government recruited some Hausa police (from present-day Nigeria) instead, under a policy of "recruiting 'the trustworthy stranger to police the other stranger'" (Tankebe 2013:579). As Tankebe notes, "the effect of this policy of external recruitment was to reinforce the disconnection between the police and the local community and the view that the police were 'an intrusive alien force,'" a practice which in many ways "has persisted throughout the period of decolonization into the present democratic dispensation" (Tankebe 2013:579–80). Concerns to resolve issues of corruption within police forces, while sometimes addressed, were not undertaken for the purpose of building an effective and community-minded police force, but simply to continue to protect colonial interests at all costs (Tankebe 2013:580).

This, then, has been the postcolonial policing legacy in too many African countries: police forces which have inherited "the mistrust, fear, and hate that the majority of the people felt toward the colonial state as a foreign entity that was imposed on them" (Muiu 2010:1318). This is in addition to the mentality that their role as police is to protect institutionalized power structures at all costs, using excessive force, coercion, and intimidation, and being perceived as alien to the community; leaving citizens vulnerable and with little recourse. In this sense, much of the destructive colonial apparatus has continued on within the "postcolonial" state.

Coming to the present, successive post-independence leaders have historically used the police force to advance their own interests, further entrenching and normalizing violence as the only way to deal with citizens. The police are rarely held to account, while accountability mechanisms such as the 2010 Constitution of Kenya remain unimplemented. And of course, this situation is not uniquely Kenyan. Similar trends have been reported in scores of African countries that continue to grapple with brutal police forces, who in themselves may be seen as a part of the colonial legacy, having initially been convened and trained by colonial leaders to uphold colonial interests. This mindset, which includes being accountable only to select leaders and protecting the interests of those in power rather than the wider citizenry, and of using violence to subdue and control the public to achieve those ends, is a stubborn post-colonial legacy which remains difficult to eradicate.

These senseless and utterly preventable deaths of citizens at the hands of police officers have brought into focus the various intersections of the residual colonial legacies of racism, oppression, and violence in African policing. The rationale for brutal violence inflicted on Black bodies is that the police are trying to enforce the law. Violence, including that at the hands of police, seems to be one of the lasting hallmarks of Europe's colonial history in Africa and serves to demonstrate the complexities of colonial legacies on African communities.¹⁰ The refusal by independent, post-colonial African governments to reform African policing with a view to decolonizing policing practices and engendering more humane systems speaks to how dehumanizing these legacies have been.

As Eusebius Mckaiser remarked following recent police violence against South African citizens, "our quiet response" to numerous deaths during recent lockdowns "shows that we – including many of us Black citizens – struggle to take seriously the right to life and the right not to be tortured by our own state. That is a victory for the first White settlers who came here ... It shows the depth of the moral wounds apartheid left us with ..." (Mckaiser, May 31, 2020).

2.3 *The African Church's Silence in the Face of Violence*

Thinking back to the demonstrating youth in Kibera, and of the widespread responses to Floyd's murder, we reflect that like many others across the African continent, these youth operate in environments full of disparities, where progress and regression alternate in unpredictable ways (Parsitau 2020). While there are certain segments of society that benefit from the limited economic prosperity enjoyed in East Africa in the last few years, these benefits are unevenly distributed (Murunga, Okello, and Sjögren 2014). While on the one hand we can legitimately point to postcolonial policing legacies as bearing responsibility, a further concern to us is the baffling silence of the African church to police brutality and other social and human rights violations. Even more surprising is the church's inability to speak and act against such violence as sinful and unjust; a devaluing of the *imago Dei* in one another.

10 See "Why violence is a hallmark of Kenyan policing. And what needs to change," *The Conversation*, 05 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-violence-is-a-hallmark-of-kenyan-policing-and-what-needs-to-change-139878>, accessed on May 1, 2021.

3 "I can't breathe!": African Women Groaning in Faith¹¹ and Gasping for Breath: Patriarchy, African Church and Society, and Implications for Missiology and Social Justice

Not only is the African church generally silent in the face of police violence and governmental oppressions, but it likewise remains silent in the face of rampant gender and sexual-based violence and the discrimination against women in the Kenyan church and wider society, as in other parts of the continent. In the same way that contemporary police violence against citizens has long, deep, and complex roots, so too do patriarchal systems found in African churches and wider society.

African theologian Teresa Hinga rightly argues that "there is clearly nothing innate either to [African women] as persons or to the cultures in which they live that would make African women acquiescent to social inequality. This enduring and offensive stereotype thrives on ethnocentric and sexist hermeneutics of African cultures and peoples" (Hinga 2017: Kindle edition). Hinga further argues that the silencing of African women "has largely resulted from forces in history, particularly colonialism, that have led to the erosion of their economic and political power, and quite frequently ... death" (Hinga 2017: Kindle edition). While it is beyond the scope of this article to unpack all of the complexities surrounding the ways in which colonialism and western missions have contributed to some of the ways in which African women currently find themselves silenced, it is a further reminder that to understand the present and change the future, we will need to go back and understand the past.

With the acknowledgement that African women bear these dual burdens of gendered and racialized colonial and patriarchal systems, let us briefly consider the nature of this patriarchy. We agree with Tinyeko Maluleke when he argues that patriarchy is evil; but that identifying it as such

[...] is neither enough nor helpful. The notion of evil is mainly a moral category rather than a concrete and scientific one. Patriarchy is not merely evil; it is ultimately repressive and oppressive. It is not merely something to be frowned upon, but something to be combated and overcome. Patriarchy is a supremacist ideology, i.e. it speaks to the supremacy of the male. It is not merely an attitude; it is a comprehensive, systematic ideology; a thoroughgoing theology which is at once physical and

11 See Njoroge, Nyambura and Musimbi Kanyoro, *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton, 1996).

spiritual; structural and personal, individualist and communal; human and extra-human.

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The role of African women in church and society, particularly in the face of oppressive patriarchal structures, remains highly emotive and contested. It is likened to groaning in faith and gasping for breath in all sectors of the society. In many African societies, African women and girls play subordinate roles in church and society, especially in aspects of leadership, decision-making, and in the inheritance of property and other productive assets (Parsitau 2021). Likewise, within many Christian denominations on the continent, women remain excluded from ordained ministry and/or positions of senior leadership, despite the fact that they play critical roles in the running, maintenance, and sustenance of these churches, and in many cases make up a majority of church members (Mwaura 2007:410–445).

For example, in her research about the role of women in the expansion of the church in West Africa, Ini Dorcas Dah found that out of nine churches which she surveyed, only one was ordaining women in 2015 when the research was conducted, despite the fact that women far outnumbered men and were the most active members in all spheres of church life (Dah 2017:172–175). Further discrimination is often experienced by single women, who are both left out by church and society; while in some churches, the children of single mothers are denied communion. Both within the church and wider society, because of prevailing social and gender norms, a majority of African women encounter discrimination, social and political exclusion, gender and sexual based violence compounded with the burdens of disease and poverty.¹²

According to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the issue of breath in Floyd's last utterance can relate to the fact that African women are so burdened by both church and society that they cannot breathe.¹³ Women are excluded within church leadership, while continuing to shoulder the brunt of the burden of keeping churches running. This leaves them no breathing space. Oduyoye highlights that some church teachings have been unfavourable for the thriving of women in both church and society, saying "Christians love to highlight passages in which biblical culture forces women into subordinate roles" (Oduyoye 2007:11). In the same vein, Telesia Musili indicated in an interview that,

12 For further discussion and resources on patriarchy and the church in Africa, see "The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, State, and Politics," (2009). See <http://iam.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Evil-Of-Patriarchy-Report.pdf>, accessed on June 10, 2021.

13 Telephone interview with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, July 5, 2021, Accra, Ghana.

The death of Mr. Floyd rings in our minds every time his name is mentioned. As women, mothers and sisters the call for 'mama' is a deep surrender and call to passionate assistance. It is a desperate call that the victimizer is winning, and a call for a deep, sincere and trusting love is the only saviour at such a point! It is a deep cry for help! It is a call that most African women have continued to call unto God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in ONE. The 'mother' who can give that compassionate and trusting love without malice.¹⁴

Yes, like any child would run to his/her mother or scream for assistance, Floyd's cry for assistance touched all sensitive mothers and caregivers, causing them to think about the pain they would willingly have endured if it were their loved one gasping for breath under the knees of an oppressor. Musa Dube, recalling Oduyoye, further underlines that this does not simply mean "biological mothers," but includes "mothers of the womb, mothers of the heart, and mothers of justice, who are co-creators with God in protecting all life, in the management of God's resources, and in modelling what constitutes good governance" (Dube 2020; Oduyoye 2004:57–68).

George's Floyd's cry of "Mama! I can't breathe" therefore also resonates with the long-standing sense of "asphyxiation" felt by many African Christian women, regarding their socio-religious experiences in their quests of social, racial, religious, and gendered justice in church and society (Parsitau 2021b:138). African women of faith have been crying to God, the church, and to society to listen to their "groanings" from injustice and oppression that can be traced back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and which continue within the post-colonial church. Again, we ask: where is the African church's voice here? And here again, it is helpful to consider some of the colonial roots of this situation to better understand these patriarchal legacies within the African Christian church.

3.1 *Faith and Oppression: The Intersections between White Supremacy, Colonialism and Christianity*

The dehumanization of Black people globally continues to exist at the intersections of post-colonialism, white supremacy, and Christianity. According to Harvey Kwiyani, "the spread of Christianity from Europe to other parts of the world, starting in the fifteenth century and reaching its climax in the second half of the twentieth, was greatly enhanced by racist European ideologies ... and theologies ..." (Kwiyani 2020:7). Kwiyani further argues that White

14 Telephone interview with Telesia Musili, Nairobi, Kenya, June 15, 2021.

Europeans understood themselves as being superior to others, with the belief that God had destined them to dominate and colonize within the context of evangelizing and spreading Christianity across the world. Part of this worldview was the belief that other races were invited to accept this colonization and christianization as being for their own good. While such a simplification obscures some of the complexities and nuances of this historical period, it is a useful snapshot.

Similarly, the idea of conquest and conversion frequently operated in tandem in the consciousness of the western Christians of the world, an ideology that in the 19th century “became known as manifest destiny – grounded essentially, in white supremacy and stating that Europeans had been destined by God to dominate, civilize and Christianise the world ...” (Neill 1966:43–44). The same logic, undergirded by racist ideologies, was used to justify the transatlantic slave trade, including the slave markets in the West Indies and the inhumane working conditions on plantations that went on for 450 years. “It also served to defend both colonising (and evangelising) of Africans, Asians, and beyond ... For the past 600 years, this has been European Christianity’s posture in the world” (Kwiyani 2020:7–8). The congruence between the oppressive structures and practices of racism and patriarchy, and the physical and socio-economic effects of the phrase, “I can’t breathe” are hard to ignore.

3.2 *Gender and Sexual Based Violence and the Exclusion of Women in Church and Society in Africa*

Crisis situations often bring underlying structural inequalities to the surface. In the case of police brutality, the reality of pre-existing toxic social norms, inequalities, and economic and social stresses have been heightened in the ongoing the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, Africa’s prevailing gender and social norms, including patriarchal societies characterized by male dominated hierarchies and power dynamics skewed in favour of men, have had a negative impact on women and girls’ mental and physical well-being. While this has long been evidenced by, for example, teenage pregnancy and/or early marriage, child sex trafficking, and domestic violence, experiences which continue to define the lives of millions of women and girls in Africa, such issues have also been exacerbated during the pandemic lockdowns (Parsitau 2021). We agree with Maluleke when he states that:

Time and time again African Theology has been caught napping when it comes to issues of women. This means that, by and large African Theology has been at peace with the patriarchy inherited from both Western and African cultures. The logic of patriarchy has been so internalized that

even when dealing with similar issues of dehumanization, oppression and exclusion, African theologians have not been able to make the connections. Ideologically and spiritually therefore, African theology has remained largely beholden to the supremacist ideas when it comes to gender relations.

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So, how then does the church combat the perils of the different hegemonies within which it is serving? Gender-based violence, which remains prevalent in African societies – including in Christian communities – is a justice issue and requires a radical shift of people's mind set for both women and men in the ways of using culture and the scriptures. Centuries of patriarchal interpretations of the Bible, like those which supported racialized hierarchies and slavery in the past, have left the plight of African women unresolved. Indeed, the tendency has been to try to explain or justify the texts that seem to sanction the exclusion, discrimination and oppression of women. We would argue that identifying and challenging such hermeneutical approaches is a first step to developing new ones.

4 The Circle and Liberative Hermeneutics

In response, the Circle focuses more on a liberative hermeneutic when engaging these religious texts. The Bible, according to Kanyoro, has a message of liberation for African women. Women need to claim this biblical liberation without being apologetic to the cultural set-up in which the message of the biblical passage has found its audience (Kanyoro 1990:52–53). Okure, in turn, offers a critique of this “lopsided” interpretation of the texts, arguing that the Bible has both divinely liberative and oppressive texts. This makes it critically important that we reread these texts to differentiate between the socio-culturally conditioned passages (which are therefore not universally applicable (Okure 1988:56).

4.1 *Liberation Hermeneutics: Creation, Prophetic Traditions, and the Mission of the Church*

The justification of patriarchy through biblical interpretation bears similarity to the biblically backed socio-religious construction of racism. However, such a view is challenged by a liberative reading of the scriptures, particularly those relating to creation, prophetic tradition, and the mission of the church. First, we note from the scripture that it was after God created the man and the

woman, that God looked at what God had made and declared all of it was very good (Gen. 1:31). Thus, male and female were created in God's image, equal and different, and this pleased God. Therefore, the creation story of Genesis 1:26–27 forms a basis for gender equality and equity, challenging gender-based violence and any notions that it is acceptable for one person to be violated by the other.

Secondly, the prophetic tradition of the Bible is vocal on matters of social justice. Characterized by the prophets' sustained rage at social injustices and the corruption of power, this tradition articulates God's divine expectation of justice and righteousness (see, for example, Isaiah 1:21–23, 58:6–12; Amos 5:7, 11–12, 21–24). In the prophets' numerous and repeated accusations against Israel that connect Israel's unfaithfulness to God with its systemic oppression of those on the margins of society – which so often specifically highlights vulnerable women and children, the widow and the orphan – social justice is clearly revealed as central to God's mission (Jeremiah 5:26–29; Micah 3, 6:7–8). It is the prophetic tradition that invites us to reflect on the systems in our societies that propagate an unjust status quo and consider how we can transform these systems so that there is justice and equity for all.

Thirdly, the story of the Incarnation further affirms and attests to our common humanity, since in Christ both the *logos* (word) and *sophia* (wisdom) became human. “The Word became a human being and lived here with us” (Jn. 1:14). Christ lived, ate, drank, slept, mourned, and suffered together with those He came to serve. The Incarnation is the divine affirmation of the common and shared humanity of female and male, and a reminder of the dignity and value inherent in our physical bodies. The gospel clearly affirms human equality, and in turn, human dignity and equality are restored through the gospel. In the Christian community all human beings are equal and precious to God. Differences in sex, race, class, disability, age or religion do not negate this equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28).¹⁵

We agree with Dube when she says, “[George Floyd’s] cry has become the cry of all people everywhere who love justice and peace. His call has become the cry of all people who worship the God of liberation (Ex. 3:7–9). His call for help is no longer just a tragic eight-minute episode – it is rather an endless call of past, present, and future voices that have been denied justice. We are called to remain eternally attentive to his appeal to Mother: ‘Mama! Mama ... I can’t breathe!’” (Dube 2020). Dube further entreats us to hear in Floyd’s cry a call to

15 For further discussion on liberation hermeneutics in an African context, see, for example, Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, 2nd rev. ed. The Bible & Liberation Series (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995).

work together to “uproot structural forces of racism and to birth justice” for the earth and all her children through our work in the church, academy, and the communities in which we serve. She concludes: in this way, “We remain called to the duty to protect the sanctity of all lives by exposing, opposing structures of discrimination and searching for a [breathing] space of nurturing all life” (Dube 2020).

4.2 *The African Church as Mother: A Liberative Response*

As African mothers and “co-creators of justice” remain attentive to the cries of others, we ask if the African church is attentive to the cries of its own mothers. If God the Father is the “loving liberator” (Oduyoye 1997), how might we equally think of God as Mother within the African church? Indeed, the Ghanaian oral poet Afua Kuma comfortably refers to Jesus as “The Mother to whom we will return and say, ‘please take us!’” (Kuma 1981:40). The work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, particularly their writings, illustrates the power for subversion of, and liberation and healing from, the patriarchy that the African traditional role of the woman as storyteller holds.

Research on the co-relation between narratives and identity construction from a post-colonial feminist perspective note that patriarchal constructions of “normative femininity” are fundamental to the exploitation of women by patriarchal power while the conformity of women entrenches this exploitation.¹⁶ However, by telling and re-telling stories of women that defy these constructions of female identity, women can openly resist these accepted oppressive models and disrupt the foundations of patriarchal control.

In seeing themselves in the biblical narratives of women who defy patriarchal norms, African women are empowered to resist and disrupt identities of African normative femininity constructed by patriarchy and work to renegotiate their identities. Hence, by creating and facilitating spaces where women can come together to study the Bible and see themselves differently through it, the African church comes alongside women in rejecting patriarchal oppression. These spaces provide the opportunity for the construction of a liberated and empowered self-identity while shifting the African church from a place of oppression to a place of liberation.

16 See, for example, Carole Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994); Elizabeth F. Oldfield, *Transgressing Boundaries: Gender, Identity, Culture, and the ‘Other’ in Postcolonial Women’s Narratives in East Africa* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013):32–35; Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2005).

As George Floyd's cry for breath struck a painful chord in the hearts of African mothers, so too should the cries of African women grab the heart and attention of the African church! To continue to ignore it is to continue to kneel on our necks and slowly extinguish the life from us. It is not enough for the African church to simply release its oppressive knee from the neck of its women. It must be at the forefront of the deinstitutionalization of the oppression of patriarchy by critically reflecting on its current praxis and consider in which other ways it will participate in liberating women to breathe, to disseminate their voices, and to heal from the oppression of society.

5 From Lament and Longing towards Liberation: Envisioning a Future with Breathing Space for All

Returning to Floyd's last words and the themes of "Mama!" and "I can't breathe!," we find in the simultaneous tragedies of the murder of Black/African citizens at the hands of police, as well as the breathlessness of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing "asphyxiation" of African women (Parsitau 2020) a *kairos* moment. As African women, it is a chance to look back and lament over the ways in which we have struggled in church and society with patriarchy, discrimination, and the misreading and misapplication of biblical texts which were intended for our liberation. We further look back and lament over the ways in which exploitive colonial mindsets, which preferenced some people and some goals over others, have left imprints of violence and brutality against African citizens, as seen by the high levels of police violence particularly against our youth.

But in lamenting these histories and structures which have denied the fullness of life and flourishing to all, we likewise stand up and call the church to action. We need to first understand and clearly see some of the mindsets, which like a vicious cancer, have been passed down from colonial leaders through several subsequent postcolonial generations, and which leave us now infecting one another as Africans, dehumanizing one another's bodies, genders, and God-given dignity and roles in the community. We need to ensure that our governing structures – police, government, civic leaders – have the wellbeing of citizens in mind, valuing the dignity and worth of their lives, bodies, contributions, and rights as citizens, likewise understanding themselves as equal to, as opposed to in power over, this wider community. And within Christian church structures, we need to value women equally to men; speaking against and resisting the physical, emotional, and psychological violence committed against women and girls, ensuring that they are not simply the ones

filling pews and cleaning the church, but given equal places at the (communion) table.

To return our thoughts to the image of George Floyd's last moments, choking for breath and calling for "Mama," we raise our voices first in lament for all of the George Floyds – our sons, daughters, and myriad loved ones – whose pain we can only witness but not prevent or relieve; and second, in anger over the oppressive systems that continue to perpetrate the evils of dehumanization against us. We also raise our voices as African women to say to the church that it is time that we all stand shoulder to shoulder, men and women, throwing off poisonous legacies that devalue the image of God in the "other," and work together as Africans, Christians, and citizens for social justice and gender equality in our communities, overturning the brutal legacies of colonialism by honouring the dignity and humanity of all.

However, while we speak as African women to the African church and society, our call is also a global one. Recounting an event in Ghana in which women from various African countries, as well as several countries from the Global North, came together to reflect upon the legacies of colonialism, Letty Russell offers this important reflection:

In looking at our histories as colonized and colonizers and at the contemporary political, economic, and social realities of both Western-initiated churches and African Instituted Churches, the group ... concluded that there was an urgent need to develop a feminist missiology that responds to the challenges of postcolonialism, feminism, and religious discourse ... Women from both colonized and colonizer nations are postcolonial subjects because they share in a hybrid of oppression and liberation. This makes it necessary to work together as subjects who critically analyze the sources and practices of privilege and who look for liberating spaces in which we can share our gospel commitment to work against international and gendered oppression.

RUSSELL 2004:23–24

Russell rightly states that this work of cultural hermeneutics is not only important for those of us in formerly colonized nations, but "is also a gift to women in colonizing nations." This is because our sense of reality is conditioned through culture; so, "by seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, we can begin to critique our own cultures and the politics and poetics of our own social locations" (Russell 2004:36). We end with a poem by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1988:35), echoing her invitation to stand together as women, dreaming of a better future in which "we will be strong together":

Dream Girl Dream

What's the future going to be?
Dream girl dream.

What we may become, that's what matters.
Dream woman dream.

Dream of the least of the world,
Permissible dreams.

Dream, for the other is you turned inside out.

Make the other strong and you will be strong,
We shall be strong together.
Dream girl dream.

Be a woman, and Africa will be strong.

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Resumen

Este artículo examina partes de la maraña residual dejada por el colonialismo, el cristianismo y la participación afro-occidental en África y utiliza el brutal asesinato de George Floyd, cometido por la policía y sus gritos de “respirar” y “mamá”, como marco para analizar el tema dentro de nuestros contextos africanos. En primer lugar, al considerar la traumática muerte de Floyd en manos de la policía, argumentamos que una forma en que las repercusiones del comercio atlántico de esclavos siguen siendo evidentes en África es en la continua brutalidad policial y en la deshumanización de los ciudadanos africanos. En segundo lugar, con el llamado de “Mama”, consideramos la difícil situación de las mujeres africanas y el cristianismo colonial/poscolonial, desafiando el silencio de la iglesia africana frente a los problemas de justicia social y su complicidad en la continua exclusión y opresión de mujeres africanas cristianas. Hacemos un llamado a la iglesia en África a reconocer su mutismo y a ofrecer un correctivo que articule una respuesta teológica y misiológica a nuestros gritos para poder respirar. Este artículo, si bien está basado en reflexiones feministas africanas, invita a la participación global y muestra las repercusiones para la justicia social y de género.

摘要

本文探讨了殖民主义、基督教和西方在非洲的参与所有的一些残余纠缠，利用乔治·弗洛伊德在警察手中残忍地被谋杀，以及他呼喊“呼吸”和“妈妈”这样的事件，为考查非洲处境内以下情况提供了框架。首先，在考虑到弗洛伊德在警察手中的创伤性死亡时，我们认为，跨大西洋奴隶贸易在非洲的影响仍然很明显的方面，就是警察的持续暴行和对非洲公民的非人道化。第二，我们援引“妈妈”，审议非洲妇女和殖民/后殖民基督教的困境，挑战非洲教会在社会公义问题上的沉默，以及其同谋继续排斥和压迫非洲基督徒妇女。我们呼吁非洲教会重审它的沉默，并为神学与宣教学的建构提供纠正，以回应我们对呼吸的呼喊。虽然本文以非洲女权主义的反思为基础，但它邀请全球参与这行动，并表明对社会和性别公义问题上更广泛影响。