MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

EDITORS

Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni
Georgina Kwanima Boateng
Molly Manyonganise

INTRODUCTION

Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni¹
& Georgina Kwanima Boateng²

This volume grew out of the conference ‘Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 5th Pan-African Conference’, hosted by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, 2 to 4 July 2019. The theme of the conference was ‘Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination’. It is from this theme, that we ultimately derived the title of this book, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religions*. The book is a compilation of revised papers that were presented by the respective authors at this conference.

The words of Musa Dube (2000:8) resonate strongly with me and helped inform my avenue of inquiry:

I came to realise the sad implications of reading and living with or by stories written for me and not by me. This is a crucial issue, given that oral sub-Saharan black African people who live in the age of the information superhighway, do not own the means of producing and disseminating information about themselves. Most of what we read about ourselves and other subjects is not written or published by us.

The sentiment in Dube’s reflection is also taken to heart by many of the scholars of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, especially the authors who contributed to this volume. Over time they have come to realise the limitations, errors and omissions in their stories as they are retold by others and recognise that they have their own her-stories, their own experiences, and their own personal stories to tell. So, by adopting a ‘positioned’ perspective here, they write about their own (once silenced) stories of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) – on their own terms and from their own perspectives.

In Africa, religion is central and perhaps the most important aspect in the lives of Africans. Yet, the foundational principles of rich African world views and beliefs are too often dangerously misunderstood by predominantly non-Africans, or “outsiders”.

-
- 1 Rev. Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni is a lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. [Email: nobuntu@sun.ac.za]
 - 2 Rev. Georgina Kwanima Boateng is a reverend minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. [Email: gynaboat@yahoo.co.uk]

Moreover, Goduka (1999) succeeds in explaining that the disdain for ATRs by European missionaries who brought Christianity to the Eastern Cape in South Africa around the 1820s is testament to “the othering” and misunderstanding of amaXhosa customs. This occurred because of the contextual insensitivity arising from the construction of European definitions of appropriate gender roles in an indigenous context. Goduka further claims that the missionaries considered themselves as the embodiment of a superior religion, race and gender; therefore, any aspects of amaXhosa indigenous traditions that did not fit into their European standards were considered offensive and abhorrent, or even primitive, savage and barbaric. In fact, Mthethwa (1996, in Louw, 2008) mentions that ATRs or spirituality pervades and permeates every facet of the life of African people and therefore cannot be examined in isolation. Instead, they must be examined conjointly by those who study the practice of religion and pastoral care. In different ways, the contributors of this volume take this petition seriously and together seek to debunk some of the myths about ATRs, including the belief that Africans do not embrace or care for the environment or Mother Earth – the core theme of the aforementioned conference and of this book.

Furthermore, the instructive viewpoint of Africans, the indigenous education process, covers all spheres of life, including religion, commerce, agriculture, weather, medicine, preservation of the environment, and so on. More specifically, Africans are not only shown to care for and or embrace the environment, but women are at the forefront of advocating for environmental issues. What we can do today is to be more proactive in taking the contributions of ATRs more seriously, something which was completely overlooked by the Western missionaries. The stories about African religion were not told by us, but by the Western missionaries who condemned most of the African rituals, which in their minds were not Christian enough. What they failed to appreciate is that African life is not divided into “sacred” and “secular”. But for the African, life is consolidated – everything seems to have meaning only in terms of the religious (Ongong’a 1983, in Muyomi, 2014:346). This notion reinforces the need for us to tell our own stories from our own unique African perspectives and personalities, with our own voices and reactions to contemporaneous circumstances, expanding and making our truths known.

Africans embrace all of life, the humanity of each person, the world, and the creation of God. Consequently, the plenitude of African indigenous education reflects the completeness of life itself (Goduka 1999). This volume brings together voices from leading proponents of ATRs and African religious heritage, bonding us all together, to help us appreciate how values are richly entrenched in African religious life. This volume demonstrates the detailed richness of ATRs and culture and showcases how far the academic study of ATRs in Africa has come.

The various chapters in this volume recount religious events and experiences from individual perspectives as they are unfolding on the continent. The different voices show how modernity, colonisation, urbanisation, Christianity, and technology have sidelined beliefs and practices of ATRs to the detriment of the environment. The book therefore calls for concerted effort through a partnership between these various actors to ensure environmental sustainability.

The many conversations that took place at and after the conference have produced this phenomenal body of work. The book is organised in ten closely related chapters, although they follow no specific sequence, and can be read in any order. Since the book is a diverse collection of chapters that share a common theme as reflected in the title of this volume, I invite the reader to read each chapter individually, taking in the topics addressed by the authors.

Penxa Matholeni sets the tone for this outstanding volume as she makes a gendered analysis of initiation rituals for boys and girls. She considers the unequal allocation of spaces amongst amaXhosa rituals and gives particular attention to the impact of this on relationships within this society, especially between women and men. She concludes that these rituals are sacred and have their place, but they have been used to disadvantage women.

Masaiti Mukuka explores how gendered narratives in ATRs have been absorbed into and entrenched within Christian religions in Africa, and how this has affected environmental conservation. In doing so, she reviews the experiences of the wives of *Bashi Cingo* in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church.

Boateng picks up on this theme in her chapter as she scrutinises the changing place of Earth in the journey from indigenous pre-Christian African worship to contemporary African Christian worship in the particular case of Ghana, and looks especially at how this has affected the space and place of women. She proposes a rediscovery of African Christian worship as a place for Earth participation by introducing Jesus into African indigenous Earth-centred worship.

Molato examines how the abolition of indigenous religious practices and the imposition of Christianity in the postcolonial period has impacted on environmental conservation using the particular case of the rainmakers in Setswana cosmology.

Manyonganise and Museka critically examine the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) of 2000 in Zimbabwe. They describe the negative impact of the FTLRP on what was left of the taboos amongst the various Shona ethnic groups and contend that the FTLRP has had the effect of 'sedating' the sacred as people have violated the taboos related to the environment with impunity. In their contribution, they devote particular attention to the critical role of women in environmental conservation.

Sipeyiye examines the Ndaui notion of ‘communal existence’ to explore the themes of interconnectedness, reverence, embeddedness, and reciprocity with nature to advance the agenda of environmental sustainability. Sipeyiye thereby supports the conception that ATRs are biocentric, as they see all living beings as elements of one interdependent spiritual community.

Phili takes this further by accentuating the interconnectedness between the African and the land through an examination of burial rituals in Southern Africa. He shows that, even in death, Africans are still connected to the community through the land by means of a proper burial ritual. The land is very much a part of Africans’ communal existence through a relationship that does not get severed – even by death – although urban burials have the potential of severing the ties that Africans have with their ancestry.

Nkomazana writes to cement the notion that attitudes, and perceptions influenced by religion play a crucial role in environmental sustainability. She does this by examining the role played by indigenous religious practices and beliefs in the contexts of the Kalanga in the north-east of Botswana. In her chapter, she also explores the effects that modernity and Christianity have had on indigenous beliefs and practices and concludes that all are necessary partners in environmental sustainability.

Nyaga examines how technology diffuses into society and changes its traditional values, thereby establishing how important it is for communities to live according to their traditions and culture, partnered by technology, in ensuring environmental sustainability. Governments’ role in ensuring such partnership to create sustainable economic conditions for African communities is emphasised.

Chilongozi concludes this volume fittingly with her chapter that emphasises the necessary role of religion, especially ATRs, in the achievement of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She reflects theologically on the SDGs and Mother Earth by engaging the theologian and founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Mwawi uses Oduyoye’s four central themes as a theological lens for doing theology in Africa: (1) community and wholeness, (2) relatedness and interrelationships, (3) reciprocity and justice, and (4) compassion and solidarity. Through her thoughtful contribution, she draws attention to the need for appropriate planning and action to push us towards evolving into good stewards of creation.

We would like to close this introduction with the words of Guba and Lincoln (2005, cited in Chilisa, 2012): “We stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigm controversies and new textual forms.

Introduction

At some distance down this conjectural path, when its history is written, we will find that this has been an era of emancipation: emancipation from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, emancipation from generations of silence, and emancipation from seeing the world in one color.”

References

- Chilisa, B. 2012. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Dube M.W. 2000. Batswakwa: Which traveller are you (John 1:1-18)? *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 108(November):79-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03768350120045330>
- Goduka, I.N. 1999. Indigenous epistemologies – ways of knowing: Affirming a legacy. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 13(3):26-35.
- Louw, D.J. 2008. *Cura Vitae. Illness and the healing of life*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.
- Ongong’a, J.J. 1983. Life and Death, A Christian dialogue. *Spearhead*, 78. Eldoret: AMECEA Pastoral Institute, Gaba Publications.