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## 9 | African Women Befriending Jesus in Teresa Hinga's Ecclesia

*Loreen Maseno*

### Introduction

Teresa Mbari Hinga, is a Kenyan and a professor of Religious Studies in U.S.A, specializing in African religions, Feminist theologies, Religion and contemporary moral issues. She holds a Doctorate from the University of Lancaster U.K. Her doctoral work was a unique contribution to her theological enterprise wherein she was able to examine the Legio Maria independent Church and the transformations this church had made upon Mariology from the Roman Catholic Church (Hinga 1992b).

For her, the distinct history of Africans is a history that is marked by colonialism, therefore the cultural context from which African women theologians speak is distinct. There is a decisively ambiguous impact of Christianity in the lives of African women. Christianity has participated in the oppression of women, since it has functioned to legitimize colonialism, racism and sexism. However, at the same time, African women have appropriated for themselves the gospel of liberty implied in Christianity (Hinga 1996:31).

This chapter highlights African traditional heritage as one of the sources for Hinga's theology. It points to Hinga's explorations of African religions and Feminist theologies. This chapter further explores Christology in which East African women can befriend Jesus first as a personal friend who engenders hope in many women. It shows how Hinga is critical of any Christology which encourages sexism, racism and patriarchy.

According to Hinga, "women's experiences are so diverse that to speak of a monolithic feminist theology is seemingly absurd" (Hinga 1996:27). Women around the globe have to come to realize that women's experiences are tremendously diverse. Consequently, this has occasioned the rise of several feminist theologies, as women analyse ways in which

sexism affects them in their particular social, political and historical locations (Hinga 2002:79). Hinga further notes,

Much has been written and said concerning the plight of all women all over the world. Protests, campaigns and symposia have been undertaken to highlight the problems of oppression met by women almost universally... It is of interest to note, however, that much of the discussion centres around the theme of woman as a victim of negative social circumstances and her place under the tutelage of patriarchy. The emphasis has been on the need to liberate women. (Hinga 1999:37, 41).

In general, Hinga is concerned about women being agents of social transformation, instead of being objects of mercy and kindness.” Her ideas are in conversation with patriarchy, gender, western feminist theology and African theology. In general, for the present and future, Hinga’s input outlines that any relevant Christology for African women is one which presents Christ as a concrete and personal figure who engenders hope in the oppressed by siding with women.

## **The historical, cultural and religious contexts that motivated her work**

In theologising, Hinga takes cognisance that there is a decisively ambiguous impact of Christianity in the lives of African women. She notes that Christianity has participated in the oppression of women, since it functioned to legitimize colonialism, racism and sexism. These are the main historical contexts in which many East African women found themselves betwixt. The history of colonialism had a deep impact on many East African women. A number were denied access to theological training colleges and other training institutions for many years. Males were quickly recruited, trained and ordained. The selective criteria that was employed disenfranchised many females, who even dropped out of school since their prospects were dim.

Hinga is well versed with the colonial context in Kenya. Before 1914, British settlements had begun in the central highlands of Kenya. Colonialists ensured forceful eviction of people from their land and if they insisted to remain, they could only do so in the vicinity as squatters or forced laborers. These events were not very far from Hinga who was is

familiar with novels such as *a grain of Wheat* by Ngungi wa Thiongo. The colonial landscape was well replayed in the novel, whose characters are set a rural setting and are tremendously and diversely affected by colonialism.

In Kenya, this colonial context affected very many women indicating a somewhat grim future for them and their families. To begin with many males were incarcerated for no apparent reasons, and in order to provide forced labor around the railways and road construction. Very many young men from villages were arrested and taken to detention at the primacy of their marriages. This caused major societal disruptions in very many families, who ended up childless or divorced.

Racism is another context in which Hinga notes in her works. This context was particularly exploited by the colonialists who treated the rest as second-rate citizens. Many places were set apart for the people of colour and other places for the colonialists who took great advantage of such disparities. At the same time, the heads of top schools were only to be Caucasian, whereas the natives were not allowed to be leaders in top ranking schools for very many years. The types of trainings available for natives was skewed so as to fill the labour force with particular roles such as clerks, secretaries, typists and the like.

Sexism is another context in which Hinga's work grew from. Being one of the founder member of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians, she openly declares that the Circle is concerned with voicing protests against sexism and its roots in religion and culture (Hinga 1996:31). The Circle was founded on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1989 in Accra, Ghana. It is a contemporary network of women from across Africa, and is a voluntary movement, whose work often takes place within regional meetings. The Circle was inaugurated in order to facilitate the writing, research and publication by a multi-religious and multiracial network of women (Maseno and Mligo 2019:37).

Sexism in East Africa has continued to disadvantage many women who are accorded a second-class citizen placement. In and of itself, sexism has hindered the advancement of many women who have what it takes in politics, health, education and other arena. In the face of sexism, she shows however, at the same time, that African women have appropriated

for themselves the gospel of liberty implied in Christianity (Hinga 1996:31). East African women dialogue with their male counterparts in many areas. These common areas and of which provide a broader context for East African women includes poverty, racism, cultural, social, ethnic and political problems.

In order to attend to sexism and in an effort to provide a cure, the Circle members present a 'Two-winged' theology. In this theology, women work in co-operation with men of good will for the reconstruction of a religious and a cultural praxis of sexual equality. This theology asserts a relationship with African men.

### **Sources and norms for Hinga's theological journey**

Hinga notes that women around the globe have to come to realize that women's experiences are tremendously diverse. This diversity has occasioned the rise of several feminist theologies, as women analyse all the different ways in which sexism affects them in their particular social, political and historical locations (Hinga 2002:79). This reflection includes the appropriate sources for theology that Hinga takes up in her theologizing.

The first source that she uses is women's experience. In her doctoral study at the University of Lancaster U.K. she teased out the experiences of women within a Kenyan Independent Church, Legio Maria. She worked amongst many women from this church and gathered data which was fruitful for her work. These experiences of women inspired by Marian devotion were pertinent to the development of her theology on Mariology within an African Independent Church.

Hinga also uses Scripture as a source for her theologising. According to her, the virgin birth of Jesus and the nativity stories were key in exploring the role of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church and also in the Legio Church. Her findings brought to fore the way myths of powerful old women were symbolically connected to the Legio and was not limited to Mary the mother of Jesus, but also extended to post-menopausal women. In sum she was able to unfold with ease how Legio ideas were a blend of Luo mythology and Legion of Mary piety where there was an interaction with ancient myths and current translations of Christianity.

But in Hinga's use of biblical tradition, she avers to a critique of the bible in the economy of women's emancipation. In her view,

Seldom do we hear of women as subjects and actors in the drama of social action or as moral agents in history...The biblical tradition does seem to underline the fact that women are victims of social injustice. Women are targeted as objects of divine concern, particularly the case of the poor women, widowed women and barren women. However, it is significantly silent about women as social transformers. The New Testament is some improvement of the old, but it is not eloquent about the role of women as agents, as subjects that act rather than objects that are acted upon (Hinga 1999: 37, 41, 42).

It follows that many women are not encouraged in religious spaces to be agents and take the lead toward social transformation. It appears that this role is almost always given to the males in the community. They are the ones to decide how East African women are to operate and how far they can reach. Hinga seeks that many East African women take up the role of actors and agents whose actions can change society and the communities they live in.

Hinga references the African Traditional Heritage to set up inroads into her theologizing. For her African culture has positive aspects that encourage human flourishing, but there are also some aspects which should not be encouraged and they are not life affirming for many women. Hinga in her work on Inculturation points to how inculturation is an essential aspect for the application of the gospel as a liberative principle in all aspects of the African traditional Heritage. Thus, from the vantage point of this heritage, inculturation should proceed to point to the need to abide by the dignity of the Africans and the need for self-definition. For East African women, it means a preparedness to allow them to say 'this I am', and a preparedness to accept their rejection of extraneous definitions that are the culmination of the process of 'othering'.

## **Hinga and befriending Jesus in East Africa**

Within Hinga's Christological matrix, it is important to note two aspects that were evident within the description of the Christology that found expression in missionary praxis. Jesus Christ was not native to the religious forms of East Africans. Jesus had to be introduced to the people

of the region primarily by the missionaries who spread inland in the early twentieth century. In doing so, two images of Christ were made prominent and expressed. One prevailing image in missionary praxis was that of Christ the conqueror who legitimized the subjugation of the African race during the period of colonial and imperial expansionism. As a conqueror, it was justified for many East Africans to be conquered from their ancestral lands and the country taken over in the name and with the help of this conquering and victorious Christ.

This was a Christ of conquest, who would win every battle and destroy those who stood in His way of Kingdom and colonial expansion. This Christ was the King in whose name new territories both physical and spiritual, were fought for, annexed and conquered. Each conquest was celebrated as having been undertaken in the name of and with the help of Jesus the King. This shade of imperial Christianity came along with an imperial Christ to match, where winning Africa for Christ was a major motivating factor.

This prevailing imagery had it that Africa was the treasure to be looted for Christ. Those who came to East Africa with an imperial Christ image, propagated cultural and spiritual imperialism of the highest level. As missionaries, they went on to relegate African culture to the dustbin, demanding that all converts take up new names “Christian names” found in the bible. They demanded that converts change their lifestyles, marriage agreements, clothing, diet and the like in order to be real Christians. But this mode of missionary expansion had dire consequences, for instance the welfare of African women concerned in polygamous marriages was not taken into consideration. Upon conversion, a polygamist would be asked to immediately send away all but one of his wives as a condition for baptism. Such a posture, did not take into consideration the future and wellbeing of those women and children who were discarded.

The second imagery propagated by the missionaries was that of Jesus Christ the liberator. To have this understood and demonstrated, many mission stations established by missionaries in the African interior served as orphanages and shelters. In the midst of natural disasters like famine and floods, a number of people found themselves unable to cope and they found shelter in the mission stations. For others, tribal wars were the

reason they left their homes to live in mission stations. Still for others, conversion and access to education were the driving forces. Some women took shelter in the mission stations in their attempts to be free from unsatisfactory marriages or harsh parental control.

This imagery presented Jesus as one who cares and liberates the indigenous people from yokes, wars, diseases, illiteracy and the like. Health stations and schools were domiciled in these mission stations. Lives were saved in the face of pandemics and diseases. This Jesus was one who was near the suffering. It follows therefore that for Hinga, the Christ of the missionary enterprise was therefore an ambivalent one, on the one hand, a conqueror legitimizing subjugation and on the other hand a liberator.

East African women befriended Jesus who is as a personal friend who helps East African women bear their grief, loneliness and suffering. Over the years and even after independence, East African women have embraced Jesus in their songs, prayers, reflections and situations. Studies among East African widows have shown the way widows experience loneliness since they had a partner and spouse before. After their spouse died, they were left alone to plan matters. It was evident that a number wished that their loved one was present to do some of the things they would have normally done. For example, during important meetings in the home, widows found that there was a void and that they needed to call for elderly male relations who would be there when they wanted land divided, when cows were to be taken by their sons for bride wealth etc. Bearing loneliness is not easy for anyone. East African widows experiencing loneliness and a feeling of being abandoned or isolated led to a desire for the intervention of Jesus by many (Maseno-Ouma 2014).

Feelings of loneliness could be explained in various ways. It is possible that many East African widows were overwhelmed by day to day parenting responsibilities. Similarly, they may have felt uncomfortable with old friendships, since they felt uneasy being around married couples with their children and jealous of happy couples who were still together. For some widows, instead of enduring such mixed emotions, they deliberately removed themselves from common activities, thus intensifying their loneliness (Reggy-Mamo 1999:74-76).



Hinga shows that East African women befriend Jesus, the iconoclastic prophet who stands out as a critic of the status quo, an image often found within African Independent Churches. As a prophet, Jesus calls out all forms of oppression without fear. The prophet speaks on behalf of God. This is one of the offices of Christ and many East African women remain keen to hear the words of Jesus.

Hinga demonstrates how African women are victims of oppression and muteness in society therefore, an image of Christ that is popular is one that blends Christology with pneumatology, especially in the African Independent Churches, patronised mostly by women. For many women who are expected to be silent, the pneumatic possibilities where the tongue is unrestrained and the voice of God is heard through females and males, is an attractive Christology for many East African women. In which case, Jesus is the embodiment of the spirit, the power of God and he becomes the voice of the voiceless thus empowering women to be less inhibited and muted.

Besides the ambivalence created from the Christology of missionary praxis, East African women have boldly befriended Jesus and named Him in their lives and circumstances (Maseno-Ouma 2014). They are fearless in their articulation of whom Jesus Christ is to them. They go on to share this repository of theologies in their stories, dances and prayers for all to hear and become actors in the socio-political, cultural and economic arena (Maseno 2020). But at the same time, a relevant Christology for African women is one which presents Christ as a concrete and personal figure who engenders hope in the oppressed by siding with women. It is not enough to have any Christology but East African women seek a concrete Christ on the side of the powerless, giving them power and voice to speak for themselves.

The Christ that East African women befriend is the one who is actively concerned with the lots of victims of social injustice and the dismantling of unjust social structures. He is the Christ who is expected to be on the side of women as they fight for the dismantling of societal sexism that has oppressed them through the ages. At the same time, East African women have to be on the lookout and remain critical of any versions of Christology that would be opposed to their cause by encouraging sexism

and functions to entrench lopsided gender relations (Hinga 1994:261-268).

### **The purpose of Hinga's theological thinking**

Hinga sets out to encourage women to step up for their liberation (Hinga 1992a). She encourages East African women to resist any Christology, biblical tradition, cultural mandate and praxis which oppresses and subjugates women. The purpose of her theologizing is to encourage, to conscientize, to awaken, quicken and embolden.

She is clear when she states,

Women therefore are called not only to be recipients of liberation to enjoy the privilege of liberation, but also to be challenged to become subjects, by actively undertaking the task of liberating, transforming, not only themselves but also society to ensure a more humane and egalitarian future (Hinga 1999:44-45).

Hinga is persuaded that East African women are a force to reckon with. They should upon liberation not remain comfortable but proceed with speed to transform the rest of society for the good of the coming generations. It is for her, not enough to be liberated, but to also as an active participant proceed to be an actor and a change agent across the region. This would enable the eschatological hope of a balanced society to come to pass.

### **Hinga's theology in relation to patriarchy and colonialism**

It is clear that in many parts of East Africa, patriarchy and the rule of the father remains dominant. Within this context, there have been forces which women have had to contend with. Competition has stifled women's progress in many arenas. Others have missed out on opportunities due to the hierarchy embedded in the form of patriarchy experiences across the region. Hinga shows in her writings and papers the need for a consciousness-raising effort. When many women are conscientized to call out patriarchy in many of its forms, they shall be able to name these oppressive forces and find a way toward emancipation.

In as long as many women are unaware of what keeps them down, they will continue to be denied the opportunity to flourish in the society. To Hinga, many women in East Africa remain subjugated. However, there is need to invoke and stir up a process by means of which women are liberated, and a process that awakens them to participate in the process of human liberation in general (Hinga 1999:44). Consequently,

A society or [a community] is one where there is an eradication or correction of patriarchy which often leads to women being discriminated against, oppressed and exploited because of their sex. In a society or community, there needs to be an unmasking of sexual injustices and their subsequent elimination in order to bring about the liberation of women... It is with legitimation that women should take up the challenge of social transformation, unmasking and eradicating social injustices to pave the way for the eschatological community that the bible looks forward to (Hinga 1999:43).

Hinga seeks a correction of patriarchy owing to its devastating effects in society such as discrimination. Many women in East Africa are not given equal opportunity in the church and society. A number are not allowed to speak in certain arena. Hinga sees feminist theology in East Africa as an objection against the forced silence and at the same time a challenge to African women to rise against the forces of injustice that besiege them. Many years of forced silence may in fact have led (East African) women to become indifferent to the various oppressions (Hinga 1996:28).

Tradition is invoked when land matters are being discussed in villages and women are asked to only to watch. Discriminatory traditions continue unabated, even as many women are called on to serve their male kin around the clock oblivious of the toll these places on them. Those menial jobs that are not payable are relegated to women, whereas if men are to take them up, they demand to be paid.

Hinga emphasizes that patriarchy also encourages oppression and exploitation. When women go into the farms to plant cash crops, many are not rewarded when their husbands go to pick the bonuses of coffee and tea. Their labour is not accounted for and in many areas in Kenya, their husbands that opportunity to marry additional wives or disappear with other women until they have squandered the bonuses. The impact of

such exploitation is severe, with many children lacking basic needs in the home.

As a Christian, Hinga looks forward to the eschatological community where wild animals and humans shall live in peace and both females and males shall live as one humanity in mutuality. Social injustices have hindered community in many African settings. However, upon the eradication and elimination of sexual injustices, women shall be liberated to enjoy human flourishing in East Africa.

But the colonial expansion in East Africa is one historical patch that Hinga addresses and calls out for what it is. According to her, many East Africans have a distinct history marked by colonialism. This distinct history therefore, provides the cultural context from which African women theologians speak with a rather distinct voice. There is a decisively ambiguous impact of Christianity in the lives of African women. Christianity has participated in the oppression of women, since it has functioned to legitimize colonialism, racism and sexism. However, at the same time, African women have appropriated for themselves the gospel of liberty implied in Christianity (Hinga 1996:31).

## **Hinga in Conversation with John Pobee on Christology**

John Pobee studied African and Christian religion in Africa, England, Germany and the United States. Between 1974 and 1975, he was a resident fellow at the Institute for Ecumenical and cultural research at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Pobee is a native of Ghana. He is author of many books and articles.

The quest for an African Christology has led to several Christologies, which try to interpret in categories of our time the Christ who meets us in our culture. Pobee's Christology is a functional one. It focuses on the deeds of Jesus that result in an image of Christ to the believer. In his seminal book, he asks,

Who is Jesus Christ? ... How does he affect my life? Why should an Akan (a tribe in Ghana) relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation? (Pobee 1979:81).

Pobee notes that the Akan outlook prefers concreteness to abstraction. For this reason, the Jesus of Nazareth is expressed in terms of Jesus' activity as Nana. Pobee states that,

In Akan society, the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for the good life and punish evil. And the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being. Our approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest ancestor - in Akan language *Nana*. With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil. Again, in our context, we shall seek to emphasize that even if Jesus is *Nana* like the other illustrious ancestors, he is a nonpareil of a judge; he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closest to God and as God (Pobee 1979:94).

Both Hinga and Pobee are inclined to a functional and concrete Jesus who is experienced by the people. However, Hinga would be quick to note from Pobee's Christology the danger of having Jesus as *Nana*. This is because Ancestors among the Akan possess great human achievements and often, achievements by women in a patriarchal society are not taken into account. Furthermore, given the strict division of labour among the Akan traditional society, how would an Akan great ancestor relate to a downtrodden widow?

For Teresia Hinga's work, subordination of women is exemplified by their years of forced silence that has led many to acquiescence with the various oppressions. These insights are valuable in as far as women's experience is a norm and source for African women's theology and is consequently allow Hinga to critique the *Nana* possibility. The great ancestor would in many ways correctly fit in the experience of the Akan males and not the entire Akan community.

Hinga would continue to show that Pobee's Christology as a source for inculturation in Africa is lacking since he utilises a high Christology and in so doing, is unable to relate to the cries of the underprivileged and the downtrodden. The Akan is a patriarchal society. As such, it is a society characterised by asymmetric dualisms thereby legitimizing patriarchal relations of domination and subordination as "natural difference".

## CONCLUSION

Hinga leads East African women to encounter and befriend Jesus. Her Christology is that which engenders self definition, liberation and empowerment for women. She is critical of any source for African Theology becoming that which encourages oppression, sexism and patriarchy. Hinga contributes enormously to African women's Christologies with important perspectives. She is able to distill how the imperial Christ in missionary praxis was a disservice for many who experienced colonial oppression. Further to this, Hinga's theological enterprise opens up room for further dialogue with African independent Churches on Christology, ecclesiology, mission and Mariology. It is clear that East African women, whether young or post-menopausal can be enjoined in powerful imagery and myths of independent Churches. These women would exude power and bring balance in the somewhat lopsided religious arena in Kenya. However, even as Hinga urges women to be agents of social transformation and not just wait to be liberated by others, she does not pay attention to the possible distinction of Woman and women when she decries the lack of agency among women. This makes it very difficult to envision women and men as allies and partners in the process of social change. At the same time, Hinga, opens possibilities for naming Jesus in the twenty first century regardless of status and background. Hinga leads East African women to raise their voices and speak in order to be heard in their liberated state. Hinga opens room for East African women to speak about Jesus Christ according to the feminist model of inclusion and reciprocity.

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