Editorial: African Feminism and African Spiritual Traditions

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This special volume is amongst the outcomes of a project hosted by the African Gender Institute through a strategic initiative focused on the gendered systems of power embedded in culture, tradition and religion. Starting in 2021 the African Gender Institute hosted a convening on how tradition, culture and religion are operationalised in the production of gendered social norms, economies of care and gender-based violence, and how African feminist theorisations might engage with this. Guiding concerns for the project include what challenges tradition, culture and religion raise for feminist ways of being, what resources are available to us within these systems and finally, what work needs to be done now to grow our knowledges and deepen our feminist action.

The articles in this special volume are curated together with co-editor for the special volume, Dr Lindiwe Khuzwayo, who also spent time as an Affiliate at the AGI during 2025. While the convening was open to other spiritual traditions, the final set of articles that have emerged share a focus on African spiritual traditions. They arise out of the work of the convening and subsequent discussions, advancing our efforts to build a conceptual framework for African feminist approaches to tradition, religion and culture. Three of the four articles here emerge from the strategic initiative, and Zwane joins us in this volume as a valuable conversation partner for the project.

Lynn Ossome, writing in *Feminist Africa* earlier this year correctly observes the challenges of African feminist work

> "It has been observed that the task of imagining and building African feminism as a community of theory and praxis "is very hard work." Alongside this, it could be argued that a decolonial approach to

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> African feminism is even harder work. This is, in part, because colonial knowledges are built upon the erasure of the histories and knowledges of most of the world. The work, therefore, of reconstituting what has been erased or vulgarised is actually more difficult than what it took to put together the colonial canon" [1]

Together with the reflection piece the five entries offer important insights in response to this erasure and vulgarization of knowledge. Reversing the conventional order for a moment I begin this editorial with the reflection piece.

In her 1994 Masters dissertation, a young Nokuzola Mndende observed

> "apartheid comparative religion denied the authenticity of African religion, even occasionally refusing to designate African beliefs and practices as religion".[2]

This was amongst conclusions of a series of interviews about teaching African Religion in schools; teachers often replied with the rhetorical question ""So you want us to go back to Qamata?". She explains that "when these teachers speak of African Religion, they relate it to Qamata, the uncivilised, the primitive God". Lynn Ossome's reflections some 30 years later reflect the difficulty of going back.

Undoing erasure, returning dignity to what has been vulgarized is a life time's work. Now Dr Mndende, scholar and traditional practitioner, writes again in this volume, echoing some of her earlier concerns strengthened through three decades of analysis and critique. Once again the "school people" or those who are secularly educated and the traditionally educated are at odds, the latter advocating for knowledge vulgarised by the former. In the time in between, Mndende has written further about the European legal paradigms in African communities with regard to traditions of marriage and political leadership. In both instances Mndende raises concerns over the imposition of colonial cultural systems and sovereignty of indigenous knowledge

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1 Lyn Ossome. "The Colonial State and Postcolonial Feminist Predicaments." *Feminist Africa* 5, no. 2 (2024): 42–62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48799335

2 Nokuzola Mndende. *"African religion and religion education."* Masters Thesis., University of Cape Town, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Religious Studies, 1994. http://hdl.handle.net/11427/13864

systems, amongst them the preference for Abrahamic religious systems over others, the nuclear family over multigenerational and polygamous families, of constitutionalism or state appointment of leaders over hereditary and selected leadership, virginity testing in Christian paradigms v. traditional sexual paradigms. In many of these instances Mndende's work, treading a fine line between holding on to tradition and responding to changing ideas of gender justice, signals discomforts for feminist theorizing .

Yet, as with other advocates for indigenous knowledge systems, Mndende's recurrent concern is for traditional practices that are vulgarized by others, whether colonial others and the apartheid state, or democratic others in a constitutional post-apartheid state – one example being the ways in which virginity testing events have been regularly repackaged as Heritage Day events in contemporary South Africa. Mndende's concern is for what is historical, customary, and original about such practices, and how this is diminished, disregarded or drastically transformed, and ultimately shifted to meet a new political end that does not favour indigenous knowledge. The take-away from Mndende's argument is that amidst competing systems of knowledge, the indigenous is expected to give way to the new arrival. Recurrently, other authors here also bring attention to the hegemony of new and powerful knowledge systems over previous and now marginalised local knowledge systems, highlighting concerns for the sovereignty of indigenous knowledge.

African feminist theorizing is also concerned with knowledge claims - with what is made to seem natural or normalized, and the discursive functions of difference in competing knowledge claims. It examines how the gaze of the other interprets the realities of those who are local, concerned for how powerful, newly-arrived knowledge systems are easily granted privileges over local knowledge systems. Through the last few decades, African feminist engagements with spiritual traditions have had strong roots - and now equally strong branches - in Christian religious traditions, and more recently in Muslim religious traditions. African religious traditions have not received similar attention in academia, because the entanglements of coloniality not only prioritized spiritual practices that resembled Christian religiosity but also cast suspicion on non-scriptural traditions.

Shifting the analytic gaze toward oral traditions, amongst the recent scholarship in indigenous feminist pedagogies have been Yvette Abrahams,

June Bam and Babalwa Magoqwana.[3] In different ways they demand recognition of indigenous knowledge transmission through oral traditions across generations. Correcting for the marginalisation of women's voices in traditional narratives, they prioritise indigenous women's epistemologies arguing for grandmother pedagogies, amongst them *aussie* pedagogy and *ugogo* pedagogy, which also feature amongst the authors in this issue.

Turning our attention to the articles, the work of Zwane and Sithole et al, offer feminist and queer theoretical insights to these epistemic challenges, namely by reclaiming knowledge systems, reshaping authority and reframing or re-imagining contemporary responses. The first is a suggestion for multiple epistemic registers; Li'Tsoanelo ka Mangethe Zwane builds on the work of Babalwa Magoqwana and June Bam to offer a theoretical framing for grandmother pedagogies in indigenous knowledge, through *uGogo*, connecting grandmother and sangoma. Epistemic enucleation excises the imperial/colonial gaze in recognition of embodied knowledge in *umhlobo* (divination) through *umbilini* (intuition) and *ukuboniswa* (being shown). Presented as "relational ontology", *ukuboniswa* connects being human with other forms of being, the cosmos and its various elements including animals, plants and the earth itself. In this context *uGogo* knowledge provides insights into multiple epistemic registers. And Zwane also writes from multiple epistemic locations, as a practising *sangoma*, *gobela* and academic.

Lindiwe Khuzwayo is a sangoma too, and she joins Sizwemajobe Sithole and Maheshvari Naidoo to draw on theories of indigenous knowledge systems and African feminist decolonial studies. The strategic parameters of lived experience and indigenous language, enable them to reclaim an alternative historical narrative which is also made attentive to contemporary justice discourses. Beginning with the use of Nguni language terminology of

[3] Abraham, Yvette. Ambiguity is my middle name: a research diary in *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers: Basus'iimbokodo, Bawel'imilambo*. Edited by Gasa, Nomboniso, Human Sciences Research Council., and South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture. 2007. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
Magoqwana, Babalwa. Gendering social science: *Ukubuyiswa* of maternal legacies of knowledge for balanced social science studies in South Africa in *Rethinking Africa : indigenous women reinterpret southern Africa's pasts*. Edited by Muthien, B., & Bam, J. (Eds.). (2021) Fanele, Jacana Media, South Africa. Bam, June Feminism-cide and epistemicide of Cape herstoriography through the lens of the ecology of indigenous plants in in *Rethinking Africa: indigenous women reinterpret southern Africa's pasts*. Edited by Muthien, B., & Bam, J. (Eds.). (2021).Fanele, Jacana Media, South Africa.

isitabane, *izitabane*, and *ubutabane*, they push further to explore the supposedly derogatory associations of *uncukumbili*, *ungqingili*, and *inkonkoni*, which, they argue, are also spiritual reflections on birth circumstances. They eventually reclaim this terminology too as a means of decolonizing queer subjectivities in South Africa. Reclamation here involves returning to indigenous gender terminology, and opening room for ambiguity and diversity. Contesting the historicity of the gender binary construction they recognize the "multiplicity, complexity, contestation, and change" of indigenous knowledge: gender diversity as an indigenous identity. Sithole et al present an African feminist response to traditional practices and norms as a project of memory and reclamation coupled by an ethical responsiveness to the present, representing both criticality and fidelity to tradition.

While Zwane and Sithole et al reclaim indigenous narratives, Khuzwayo and Muslim attend to the dangers of exposing the traditionally secret and sacred knowledge of *ubungoma,* arguing that this compromises epistemic authority and authenticity for consumerism and commodification. Where e-*ubungoma* "transforms a sacred epistemology into consumable content", it erodes the sanctity of ritual space and the reverence of ancestors, ultimately recasting healing as performance. But e-*izangoma* also retaliate against being marginalised and unfairly dismissed as inauthentic. Ancestral reverence and communal healing are made to contrast starkly against spectacle and profit, to be made seemingly incompatible. Yet these are also opportunities for young practitioners to enter traditionally reserved spaces and to exercise a contemporaneous impact. And so the discussion on mediated forms of *ubongoma* also allows us to apply the theoretical framing suggested by the discussion on *ubutabane*. What does it look like when indigenous actors reclaim historical practices and reframe these to meet contemporary justice demands?

The article by Lindiwe Khuzwayo brings to light the knowledge and pedagogies of *uNomehlo*, the teachers and traditional leaders tasked with upholding traditional practices and cultural continuation in virginity testing. And contrary to Mndende's concerns, here the logistic challenge is inadequate state support to uphold local practices. The cultural challenge however is in the sexual practices of the young woman attendees which include same sex practice in spaces traditionally reserved for educating young women into heterosexual marriage. The *uNomehlo* are challenged not only by the same sex relationship, but also how these relations and

virginity testing are also a means for preserving hymen integrity. Whereas thigh sex is a traditionally accepted form of sexual activity, also designed to maintain hymen integrity, same sex activity has not been so. Khuzwayo provokes us to think about how maintaining virginity is also resistance to heterosexual activity, offering lesbian girls a possible sanctuary against heterosexual coercion. Managing the future of this cultural practice, she calls for more dialogue, renewed conversations about the function and nature of virginity, to incorporate contemporary concerns of new generations of young women.

Discernably, there is a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of possibility at play in much of this work. Commonly the authors speak to care for African norms and suspicion of Euro-centric concepts, whether the narratives of the 'school people', missionaries, liberal feminists or human rights activists, each represents a hegemonic knowledge system. A hermeneutics of possibility is at play in arguments for making tradition relevant to the ethical demands of the present and expanding the possibilities of justice available within traditional communities.[4]

Responding further to the AGI call to build a conceptual framework for African feminist approaches to tradition, religion and culture, the insights of the authors also offer a pattern of engagement with tradition enacted in two steps. The first is guided by contemporary social needs and so they move from present realties into traditional practices, reclaiming nourishing narratives from the past, and next they return these to the present to meet contemporary ethical demands. This reclamation is also an exercise of discernment that is shaped by contemporary ethics. As when reclaiming the traditional language for diverse sexual identities, the authors reach back to the past to reclaim the supportive aspects of the tradition while sifting away the colonial and other accretions that either denigrate the tradition or dismiss the ethical demands of the present.

The result is not a neatly drawn line from the past to the present, from traditional practice to contemporary ethics. Rather, a complex negotiation of what aspects of tradition support the ethical needs of the present; and so, in

[4] For more on the hermeneutics of possibility which is presented as a *tafsir* of possibility, see Shaikh, Sa'diyya, and Fatima Seedat. 2022. *The Women's Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from around the World*. New Haven: Yale Uni. Press

this way reclamation is not arbitrary or wholesale but carefully guided by our contemporary justice needs. And importantly, because of metaphysical commitments to spirituality that extend through time, the actions of any moment are also considered for how they impact the present and future well-being of society. So, we observe how tradition operates as a conversation in the present, drawing on past practices to secure future well-being.

This approximates what Ipadeola calls ancestralism, where moral actions are determined by their impact on the present and the future generations.[5] Drawing from African philosophical ethics Ipadeola explains how traditional African wisdom combines with contemporary ethical discourse. "Whatever you do, if you do something wrong, if it does not affect you, it is definitely going to affect your children and grandchildren".[6] Patricia McFadden also speaks to the relevance of contemporaneous ethical demands. Contemporarity locates us in the compulsions of the present, and requires that we "respond equitably to the imperatives of human emancipation", recognising the embeddedness of the ecosystems that nurture "personal politics and feminist relationships to the self".[7] And finally, Sadiyya Shaikh has theorized a relationship with tradition characterized as "radical critical fidelity", which enables radical reclamation of traditions that might have been demonized in colonial narratives or dehumanized through patriarchal interpretation, accompanied by fidelity to holding them in conversation with contemporary ethical demands. This "critical and constructive relationship to tradition", prioritises nourishing resources within tradition, guided by "inclusive and emancipatory horizons of imagination for our times at the intersections of numerous axes of power and privilege".[8]

Commenting on the life of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, whose biography reflects the historically fluid spiritual cosmologies of African spirituality, Jack

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5 Omotose, Sharo A. Theorising African Feminist Ethics: What, Why and How?, *Feminist Africa* 2026, 6 (3) p.151.

6 Ipadeola, Abosede P. 2025. "African Feminism and Care Ethics." Talk delivered at the University of Hildesheim, Germany. https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/glophi/2025/01/09/african-feminism-and-care-ethics-research-talk-with-abosede-priscilla-ipadeola/

7 McFadden, Patricia. 2018. "Contemporarity." *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.)* 17 (2): 415–31. https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-7176560.

8 Shaikh, Sa'diyya 2023. "Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism." *Religions*. 14 (9): 1082. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091082.

Wallace makes an astute observation that echoes the challenge that Lynn Ossome announced as be we began this editorial.

> "It is not simply about pride, or trauma, or even resistance. It is about embodiment. About what it means to carry history in your bones—both the violent history of colonization and the deeper history of ancestors who speak across time."[9]

Repeatedly, undoing erasure and reclaiming dignity for what has been vulgarized is enduring work. African feminist reimaginings of African spiritual traditions continually negotiate between traditional and ancestral knowledge and guidance, and contemporary ethical demands, struggling for an authenticity that is only guaranteed while we remain responsive to its fluid manifestations. In a hermeneutics of possibility, the potentialities for justice are not stagnant, but evolving, and as they do, so must our capacity to embrace new margins and expand our measures of inclusivity so as to embrace an ever-widening range of difference.

As we witness increasing backlash against feminist imaginings and troubling instrumentalisation of spiritual traditions into regressive politics, the AGI Strategic Initiative on Tradition, Culture and Religion is grateful for the opportunity to share our work in this special volume of AJGR, and in doing so also invites further conversation - amongst diviners, theorists, scholars and others alike.

[9] Wallace, Jack. 2025. Between Ancestors and the State: A Lesbian Sangoma Challenges Colonial Gender. *Burkhardt Review*. 36-42. 10.33043/grvmqnbxkfp