AFRICAN WOMEN AND EDUCATION: VISION, MYTH, AND REALITY

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Introduction

> Zimbabwe, which seemed on the verge of a breakthrough on rights of women just fifteen years ago, was set back by an April unanimous decision of its Supreme Court that adult females are inherently inferior to males and have a status akin to that of a teenager. The court cited 'the nature of African society' as its basis.[1]

Zimbabwe is the context in which The United Methodist Church in 1992 founded the historic institution of higher education on the continent—Africa University at Old Mutare. Within less than a decade of its being established, Africa University's female enrollment is now close to 45 percent. Is education the answer to this African/Zimbabwean women's bleak condition of powerlessness going into the twenty-first century? If the answer is affirmative, how does one reconcile the Zimbabwe Supreme Court's categorical pronouncement of the "inherent inferiority of women"—a recent decision after deliberation by some of the most educated and brilliant minds in the country. In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper seeks to affirm that The United Methodist Church's commitment to the transformation of the African

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[1]Chuck Shepard, "Women Inherently Inferior, High Court Rules," *Atlanta Journal-Constitutional*, 7 September 1999, sec. C, p.2.

women's existential condition through education has become a prophetic vision. Causes of this bleak situation of the African woman lie deep in the history of the continent and its peoples.

The United Methodist Church's mission to Zimbabwean women at such a difficult time is a pattern of ministry to women of the world that this church has adopted as we enter the twenty-first century. And nowhere in the world is there a need for such a ministry than the African continent. The brief article in the *Atlanta Constitution-Journal* is a clarion call, alerting the world of women under siege.

Within the last decade, The United Methodist Church has boldly launched exclusive funding programs (scholarships, fellowships, and loans) for women of color in higher education in the United States and abroad. This places this church's efforts far ahead of other public and private agencies that are just being informed of the role of education in addressing the African woman's crisis. For example, the 1998 National Summit on Africa study document, *Education and Culture,* concludes that it is through funding for education and other material support that the struggle for African women's rights will be maintained. The study calls for churches, professional bodies, social organizations, and local non-governmental organizations to engage in the battle for affirmative-action policies for girls and women in African countries today. Regarding African Women and Education, the document states:

> In many parts of Africa, girls comprise a smaller percentage of the children in primary school than boys—and even less at the secondary level, where [they] form about 30 percent of the total. At the terti-

> ary level the situation worsens, with female students at only 25 percent of those enrolled. Yet it is well known that the education of girls and women has a positive impact on the economic and social well-being of the family and of society as a whole. . . .The economic levels of educated women are usually higher than those of their less educated sisters. More highly educated women are more likely to participate actively in political decision-making. Most important of all, education, particular[ly] primary and secondary, is a basic human right; it is persistently transgressed in many African countries because of financial constraints. . .of governments and parents. . . .Women generally have more limited opportunities for tertiary education than men in Africa. A concerted effort to address this issue would include programs aimed at expanding women's opportunities for tertiary education in key areas such as science and technology, additional facilities dedicated to women such as women's programs, women's hostels, women's colleges, and the exploration of distance education, special scholarships, and other programs that will enable young married women and young mothers to further their education.[2]

The United Methodist Church's historic engagement in seeking to liberate African women through an education ministry for the twenty-first century is the church's prophet-

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[2]National Summit on Africa, *Education and Culture* (Washington, DC: The Summit, 1998), 13-14.

ic tradition.[3] Having identified the current crisis of the African woman, the church together with African women, have committed to a prophetic vision of a world in which women and men can live together as equals in communion with God. Through a ministry of education, the church has chosen to walk with African women on a historic path to freedom. With the church of Christ, African women have never given up fighting to be free in their lifetime. A church that says "no" to misery and suffering denounces the unjust order and announces a more just world to be built by the oppressed in history is a prophetic church. This is a church in and not outside of history. In historical conflicts, the church's speaking or silence, activity or inactivity, is taking sides in the making of history. In the prophetic church's involvement in the historical-social praxis of the oppressed, a critical study of the history of a conflict is mandatory.

As we enter the twenty-first century, research on the history of suffering of the African woman should be undertaken if the church is to remain faithful to its prophetic vision of ministry to free the African woman. Studies on the current condition of the African woman have hardly begun. Those that exist have historically been conducted by the West and with the West as the intended audience. A few studies by African women do exist. The church's solidarity with African women in education is a walk not only in African women's history but that of church also. It is a position of this paper that a brief historical study of Zimbabwean women's experience within the last 100 years will equip the

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[3]See Tumani Mutasa Nyajeka, "African Women and Education: Vision, Myth, and Reality," *Quarterly Review* 20 (Summer 2000): 155-171.

church with sources and strategies for a transformative ministry within the Southern African context.

Zimbabwe: History and Women's Reality

Studies demonstrate that as we enter the twenty-first century, the reality of African women's access to education is still profoundly bleak.[4] Africa possesses a rich cultural heritage, and its peoples have contributed to the world civilizations from the origin of humankind. Four hundred years of European imperialism stole its people, its land, and ravaged its environment. Until the 1960s, and as late as the 1980s and 1990s, some Africans still languished under European political systems of slavery, colonialism, or colonization.

Zimbabwe, for example, received its political independence in 1980. These historical conditions necessitated that African women and men had limited or no access to education. Learning was seen as a dangerous tool by nearly every colonial government. To meet the needs of the local colonial administrators, systems of education limited the content and quality. For example, at independence, Zimbabwe (better off than many African countries) had just 35 percent of its children in primary school and only 2 percent in secondary school. A mere 40,000 out of a population of over 7 million had been allowed to attain three years of high school within the formal education system in twenty years before independence. Less than 1 percent could gain access to tertiary education.[5]

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[4]See Isabel Apawo Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi* [Blantyre: Malawi: CLAIM, 1997].

[5]National Summit on Africa, *Education and Culture*, 8.

Church, State, and Education

In colonial Zimbabwe it was the government that dictated the policies, curriculum design, and development as well as the general goals of formal education. Therefore, when it entered the arena of African education, the mission church of the colonial era was required by law to adopt and implement government-education policies. Referring to "Native Affairs," colonial governments often made it clear to the church that only they wielded exclusive power to dictate the law of the land. On education, one of these unwritten laws was that early education was to be almost exclusively male. Why a male-only education?[6]

For Africa, the policy of a male-only education does not lie in the simple historic explanation where European Victorian culture denied women access to education. Neither does it lie in the explanation that in the beginning the colonial labor market exclusively required male labor. Rather, it lies in what can be termed a "colonial /European fear" of the African woman's power and authority in traditional societies. During the enslavement and colonization of the continent, Europeans discovered that in most societies, African women wielded such power that males viewed them as a frustrating impediment to power, land, and wealth. In order to secure ultimate power and control, colonial culture sought strategies for neutralizing this women's power. An early and popular strategy was literary. A series of myths were spawned in colonial literature where African women were depicted with no past or history. Any power wielded by them in their societies was characterized as demonic.

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[6]See Shula Marks, ed., *Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Using these myths from colonial literature as reliable sources, the government proceeded to formulate laws and policies that denied African women human rights such as access to education, land, and resources.

When mission and government schools opened in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Zimbabwe, admission was exclusively male. Up to independence, access to an opportunity for education remained an elusive dream for a majority of female children in Southern Africa. As late as 1955, Southern African girls finally gained entrance into a mission school through the adoption of the perennial myth/story known then to melt many a missionary's heart. In this myth, a young girl in a desperate quest for admission into a mission school, pleadingly explains that she is fleeing from a traditionally-arranged marriage to a seventy-year-old man. For example, pleading with Dr. Mabel Palmer for an opportunity to further her education and flee from the village in Umtata, Transkei in 1949, Lilly Moya writes:

> The climax, if not reached, was about to be reached. Besides all the other reasons I once gave you before, all along our long correspondence, I had never told you this and now I feel compelled to tell you that I could, or in fact (would) try to endure every difficulty patiently and humbly, but not to see myself getting married in an awkward manner to a man I hated so much. That is one of the things I so much hate being married. I don't even dream about it. That awful bondage. That is what my uncle did to me. . .[7]

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[7]Michael Gelfand, *A Non-Racial Island of Learning: A History of the University College of Rhodesia From Its Inception* (Gwelo, Rhodesia: Mambo Press, 1978), 135.

When the government opened its first secondary school at Goromonzi, Zimbabwe in 1946, the total enrollment was fifty boys (no girls). Michael Gelfand, at the opening of the University College of Rhodesia, highlights what came to be known as the "Chavhunduka Affair." When the University College of Rhodesia opened its first session in March 1957 with a multiracial total body of sixty-eight full-time students, eight were African and of these only one was a young woman, Sarah Chavhunduka. No residential facility had been built for African women. As a last resort, Sarah was assigned a flat in the African men's residential hall. With her protesting this arrangement, the university agreed to resolve the akward situation. After long negotiations, she was moved to the ground floor/basement of the white women's residential hall with the condition that she have a separate bathroom and corridor. Even with these conditions, the arrangement was met with public protest from white parents who threatened to withdraw their daughters from the University.[8]

On Mythmaking

Motivated by racism, classism, and sexism, colonial society in Africa spawned a series of myths depicting African women as social outcasts who as human beings were biologically inferior. Unexposed and unchallenged, such myths have persisted in the postcolonial political and religious African male-dominated, classist cultures. British colonization of Zimbabwe was a multi-layered expedition of subjugation.[9]

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[8]Ibid.

[9]Phiri, *Women*, 42.

Through military violence the British achieved complete subordination of black men, women, and the environment in the region. The process of the subjugation of African women and the environment is rarely the subject of historical studies. Even after independence, African women have not recovered from the stupor induced by colonial violence, leaving them and the environment in a helpless culture of voicelessness. As African men hold power and positions once occupied by white men in church and society in post-colonial society, women and the environment exist in a liminal space of silence. A reading of colonial sources shows that the current crisis of female subordination in Zimbabwe is both a historical event and a social process.

Enter the British

When they entered the territory for exploration or reconnaissance purposes in the nineteenth century, the British seemed aware of the fact that in both matrilenial and patrilenial traditional societies of Zimbabwe, women wielded power and authority in politics and religion.[10] It appears they did not hesitate to spawn mythical literature on the wickedness of "native" women and the savagery of nature and environment. This literature generally depicted African women as unfeminine, sinister creatures unfit to live. Violence is given as a justifiable means to silence them or physically relives them of their wicked misery. This literature also portrayed nature as beastly savagery to be tamed. A text which captures the process of this colonial myth-

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[10]Ibid.

making on African women and nature is the classical novel, *King Solomon's Mines.*

King Solomon's Mines

Based on his expedition into nineteenth-century present-day Zimbabwe, H. Rider Haggard, wrote the classical colonial novel, *King Solomon's Mines.*[11] In the first chapter, Haggard reveals his reasons for writing this novel. The last reason is:

> Because I am going to tell the strangest story that I remember. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it—except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagoola, if she is a woman and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a petticoat in the whole history. Well, I had better come to the yoke. It's a stiff place, and I feel as though I were bogged up to the axle. . .[12]

An analysis of these two female characters indicates profiles of the African woman as created by colonial myth. In this narrrative even elephants are depicted as savage brutes. Alan Quartermain describes the end of an elephant hunt's day as follows:

> The three shots fired took effect, and down he

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[11]H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1956).

[12]Ibid., 2.

went, dead. Again the herd started on, but unfortunately for them about a hundred yards farther on was a nullah, or dried water-track, with steep banks, a steep very much resembling the one where the Prince Imperial was killed in Zululand. Into this the elelphants plunged, and when we reached the edge we found them struggling in wild confusion to get up the other bank, filling the air with their screams, and trumpeting as they pushed one another aside in their selfish panic, just like so many human beings. Now was our opportunity, and firing away as quick as we could load, we killed five of the poor beasts, and no doubt should have bagged the whole herd had they not suddenly given up their attempts to climb the bank and rushed headlong down the nullah. We were too tired to follow them, and perhaps also a little sick of slaughter, eight elephants being a pretty good bag for one day.

So after we rested a little, and the Kafirs had cut out the hearts of the two of the dead elelphants for supper, we started homeward, very well pleased with our day's work, having made up our minds to send the bearers on the morrow to chop away the tusks.[13]

On African Women

The character "Gagoola," is the ageless woman whose voice was the last word in all of Kukuanaland, as the white men found out. Gagoola symbolized the history and traditions of her country. Apart from being the medium between the people and the "Silent One," Gagoola was also the only

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[13]Ibid., 49.

person alive who knew the secret path to the national treasure.

Twala, the Kukuana king, carried out policy and politics after consultation with Gagoola. In the white men's eyes Gagoola is a symbol of evil. Upon encounter with her, Quartermain writes:

> So I so observed a wizened, monkey-like figure creeping up from the shadow of the hut. It crept on all fours, but when it reached the place where the king sat, it rose upon its feet, and throwing off the furry covering from its face, revealed a most extraordinary and weird countenance. Apparently, it was that of a woman of great age, so shrunken that in size it seemed no larger than the face of a year-old-child, although made up of a collection of deep and yellow wrinkles. Set in these wrinkles was a sunken slit, that represented the mouth, beneath which the chin curved outwards to a point. There was no nose to speak of; indeed, the visage might have been taken for that of a sun-dried corpse had it not been for a pair of large black eyes, still full of fire and intelligence, which gleamed and played under the snow-white eyebrows, and the projecting parchment-colored skull, like jewels in a charnel-house. As for the head itself, it was perfectly bare, and yellow in hue. . .
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> The figure to which this fearful countenance belonged, [which] caused a shiver of fear to pass through us as we gazed on it, stood still for a moment. Then suddenly it projected a skinny claw armed with nails nearly an inch long, and laid it on the shoulder of Twala, the king, and began to speak in a thin, piercing voice.[14]

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[14]Ibid., 125.

Endless phrases are summoned in order to convey Gagoola's ugliness, for example, bald-vultured head; frightful vulture-headed old creature, bent nearly double with extreme age; old fiend; an animated crooked stick; horrid eyes gleaming and glowing with most unholy luster, etc. The name Gagoola, given to this wise-woman leader by the three British men, is meant to convey a message. With the verb root "Gag," a reader would not need to guess what would become of such a character in the unfolding drama. This African woman was to be silenced. In this text, she is silenced. In demonizing African woman's power and authority, imperial Europe created the myth of her physical strength.

The myth of an African woman's physical strength would further be used as a silencing weapon, used to justify a historic European economic exploitation of the African woman. In apartheid Southern Africa she would endlessly toil alone, in the arrid, hot, impoverished reservations of Namibia, Zimbabwe, or South Africa. In the Americas she would toil in the heat of a harsh sun of the cotton and sugar plantation.

The other woman mentioned in the text is Foulata, the fair virgin whom the party rescued from the sacrificial gallows. King Twala had offered wives from among the fairest of the virgins. Good was ready to accept the king's offer, but was thwarted by Quartermain, who explains that he:

> . . .being elderly and wise, foreseeing the endless complications that anything of the sort would involve for women bring trouble as surely as the night follows the day, I put in a hasty answer: 'Thanks to thee, O king! but we white men wed only with white women like

ourselves. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us.'[15]

Kukuana custom was to sacrifice the fairest in complexion of girl virgins. On this day Twala's choice for sacrifice would be a young woman whom the three British men had all agreed was beautiful, full of grace, charm, and skill. After pleading for her life in vain, she turned to the white men for help. Relying heavily on their fire-power, they devised a plan to rescue Foulata from the sacrificial Kukuana spear. With a sudden movement, the girl flung herself before Captain Good:

> 'Oh, white father from the stars!' she cried, 'throw over me the mantle of thy protection; let me creep into the shadow of thy strength, that I may be saved. Oh, keep me from these cruel men and from the mercies of Gagool!' 'All right, my hearty; I'll look after you!' sang out Good, in nervous Saxon. 'Come, get up, there's a good girl,' and he stopped and caught her hand.[16]

Foulata is the African woman running away from real or imagined cultural evil. During the colonial era, she would land into the white man's arms seeking protection and refuge. The three are happy to protect and stay with this young, beautiful, and talented African woman. But the elder among them, Quartermain, again makes it very clear that their relationship with her is to remain platonic because they are white and she is black.

Foulata leaves little to imagination as to the message

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[15]Ibid., 152.
[16]Ibid., 156.

behind the name. With the verb root "foul," it certainly conveys that even this other African woman, inspite of her appearance and skill, is dirty, filthy, undesirable—black. Under condition of an asexual relationship, Foulata and the white men commit to care for each other. Together they journeyed into the intricate maze of the sacred cave in search of the Kukuana Treasury Trove. Fifteen paces from finding the goat-skin full of diamonds, Foulata rests to recover from complete exhaustion, a basket of provisions by her side. It was here that she would meet her death, from Gagool's fatal attack. She died in Good's arms, declaring her love for him:

> Say to my lord, Good, that I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know he cannot cumber his life with such as I am, for the sun may not mate with darkness, nor the white with black. Say that, since I saw him, at times I have felt as though there were a bird in my bosom, which would one day fly hence and sing elsewhere. Even now, though I cannot lift my hand, and my brain grows cold, I do not feel as though my heart were dying; it is so full of love that could live a thousand years, and yet so young. . . .Good wept.[17]

In their strategy to access the hidden treasure/diamonds of King Solomon's Mines (believed to have been located at the Great Zimbabwe Shrine), the three British men managed to conspire and stage a military coup. They overthrew the king and installed their Kukuana friend, Ignosi. At the occasion of his coronation ceremony, Ignosi inferred royal status on the British. They account that on that day:

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[17]Ibid., 244.

> An order was also promulgated throughout the length and breadth of Kukuanaland that, whilst we honored the country by our presence, we three were to be greeted with the royal salute and to be treated with the same ceremony and respect that was by custom accorded to the king. Also, the power of life and death publicly was conferred upon us.[18]

It is after this coronation ceremony that Ignosi, the new king, kept his promise to the white men to force Gagool to escort them to the sacred site, resting place of the ancestors (The Silent One), where the Kukuana chamber of treasure was hidden. On the way out of the secret chamber, Gagool is crushed to death. African woman power was extinguished.

This Prophetic Church

Liberation theologians James Cone and Paulo Freire assert that a prophetic church in search of genuine transformation of a society is one that takes a serious study of an oppressed community's historical experience. Such a praxis is an overriding biblical theme—the message of Jesus Christ. Freire postulates that there are three types of churches in relation to history. The first, the traditionalist church, whose worldview basically is imperialist and colonialist. Second, the modernizing church whose worldview is institutional and bureaucratic. Finally, the prophetic church, whose worldview historically is the search for a more just world.[19]

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[18]Ibid., 215.

[19]Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (South Hadley, MA: Bengin and Garvey Publishers, 1985), especially chapter 10, "Education, Liberation and the Church," 121-142.

There always existed a prophetic church in colonial Zimbabwe. This was the church of Arthur Shearly Cripps, and John White in the 1920s; Lydia Chimonyo in the 1940s; Bishop Abel Muzorewa in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, it is accurate to conclude that even this prophetic-church tradition failed dismally when it came to adequately addressing the situation of African women—one of suffering and subordination.

When the Methodist Episcopal Church opened its first mission with an industrial arts and bible school at Old Mutare, Zimbabwe, in 1890, it too, like the government, was for boys only. It was the traditionalist church. The church by and large chose to comply with the colonial establishment and in the end would be used to entrench the brutal system.

Womanist and feminist theologians have argued that the traditionalist church of the colonial period was imperialist, racist, and sexist. In doing Womanist theology, Jacquelyn Grant points to the profound similarities in the historical crisis facing the two sisters, African and African American. She explains that:

> A Black American woman's reality is even more complicated. Certainly women of the dominant society can afford to combat sexism and sexism alone, but Black women and other Third World women have more complicated experiences that cannot be described only in terms of sexism. Their experiences must be at least tri-dimensional for their realities are impacted by racism, sexism, and classism, and all forms of oppression, all of which must be addressed. Consequently, in light of this complicated existence, the Black woman's

> experience can more adequately be described as 'being under the underside of history.'[20]

Feminist theologians underscore the fact that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American churches generally viewed women inherently inferior to men. Citing nineteenth-century feminist protest on the traditional church's views on women and redemption, Rosemary Ruether notes:

> Redemption for these nineteenth-century American feminists meant not only the restoration of women to interpersonal equality with men but also the transformation of social and legal systems that have denied women's rights, perpetuated slavery, and waged war. Redemption is realized, not primarily in an other worldly escape from the body and the finite world, but by transforming the world and society into personal and social relations of justice and peace between humans. This the true message of Christ and the gospel. The churches have betrayed Christ by preaching a theology of female silencing and subordination.[21]

Traditionalist mission churches of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century in Southern Africa perpetuated hierarchic belief and practice along race, gender, and class in most structural forms of their expression. The church of this day

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[20]Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology in North America," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XVI (Fall 1988/Spring 1989): 286.

[21]Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 7.

was quick to adopt colonial myths that portrayed an inherent evil nature of African women. In colonial church and society African women, like Gagool, were regarded as a group to be silenced.

When they finally found their way to the mission, a majority of Zimbabwean women received a Christian education and treatment of third-class citizenship. All they had brought to the mission was rejected as almost unredeemable—their race, gender, class, and culture. Historically, African women resisted this citizenship status by founding what African women theologians have called "churches within the church-women's organizations." However, with no access to resources and gender-based solidarity, even these women's organizations barely liberated women from lives of abuse, exploitation, and deprivation. Having limited recourse, oftentimes these church women fell victim to a racist, classist, and sexist theology that presented the church as a place of escape from the traumas and trials of colonial and postcolonial society. Here, African women were expected to renounce their will to seek to alleviate a miserable reality by finding peace and happiness. Instead, this church taught them to accept her lot in life by working for a paradise in the hereafter. Such a church is not only seeking to protect the status quo but is a cave into which African women are led to their death.[22]

Is Education the Panacea?

Historically, the few African women who gained limited access in the mission church and colonial society, like

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[22]Freire, *Politics of Education*, 130-142.

Foulata, encountered a plethora of contradictions and conflicts which they never seemed to be able to resolve. In this context, promises of freedom and protection were never guaranteed. In most cases, church and state legislation and statutes enacted women's issues that sought to deprive and deny them, regardless of their education, of any human rights or privileges.

Having severed primary links with the traditional worldview, most educated African women would occupy a liminal space where they were most vulnerable to gender-based abuse in modern society and subjects of cultural ridicule in traditional settings.[23] Being neither white nor male, they were never wanted in the colonial and postcolonial church and society.

Besides being handicapped by church and state legal systems, educated African women are victims of an educational curriculum historically designed to perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism. It is one in which the African woman is taught to despise who she is. Like Foulata, at the end of the education process under such a curriculum more often than not, she is a self-loathing character who, in the end, is not capable of saving self or others.

Also based on the myth of rugged individualism and material success, these graduate African women who, like their male compatriots, are rich in material success but bankrupt in spiritual and moral depth. They are happy and eager as individuals to move into the privileged historical arena occupied by middle- and upper-class white women. Most, like Foulata, are happy to be left by men, sitting by

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[23]See Tsitsi Dangarembgwa, *Nervous Conditions: A Novel* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989).

the mouth of the cave, minding the provisions. Even when a few of these women as intellectuals and activists organize and launch protests against dehumanizing legislation and cruel treatment of women, such endeavors are often compounded by their belonging to local and global oppressor communities.

There is also a tragic contradiction of educated African women, who, in the zeal of seeking an equality with educated male counterparts, blindly adopt traditional white or male professional styles and attitudes towards others and the environment. For example, in the name of seeking efficiency, they justify attitudes of arrogance and intolerance as a necessary evil. With such contradictions, solidarity with sisters beyond class and professionalism, becomes an elusive dream. It is not unusual that like Gagool and Foulata these African women, mistaking each other for the enemy, are pitted against each other to the point of seeking to kill the other, while the architects of racism and sexism cheer in profound delight. This is a situation that only serves to perpetuate sexist and racist power and authority. An unbridled individualism in a class, society snuffs a spirit of solidarity of women across the social spectrum.

Conclusion

Among the "educated" African women, there always have been voices of a prophetic church tradition steeped in the historical African woman's quest for freedom and justice. Women such as Sojourner Truth, an African woman in America who would not be free until every African woman, man and child was free from slavery; Nzinga, the queen who illustrated African woman genius by applying political

diplomacy in a potentially explosive situation of a ruthless Portuguese military siege of her territory; Nehanda Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe, who gave up her life on the British gallows, so freedom could come to her people. It is with African women of such character that as we enter the twenty-first century, the church can work.

In its programs on African women and higher education, The United Methodist Church is boldly taking the prophetic tradition of the church into the twenty-first century. A solidarity with African women in education has incarnated a social-praxis that goes beyond selective education of individuals to efforts involving numbers of women committed to challenging repressive structures, locally, and globally. Involvement in a process that seeks to pull African women out of the culture of silence through education reveals a church which has chosen to walk with them on this historic path. A path to freedom, liberation and salvation—this is a prophetic church.

In their journey to liberation, African women need support in their initiatives, exploring their history. For example, contrary to colonial history, Southern African women continue to meet a plethora of historical evidence pointing to a glorious past of relative power and authority prior to colonization.

V.Y. Mudimbe,[24] Zairian philosopher and poet, argues that the future of the continent lies both in the old and the new. An education for liberation will be one that grants African women unlimited opportunities to re-invent them-

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[24]Benoît Verhaegen, *Religions Africaines et Christianisme* (Kinsha: Faculté de Théologie Catholiqe, 1979), 191; quoted in V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 179.

selves. A prophetic church in Africa should not just seek reforms that indirectly reinforce the racist, sexist, and classist power elites. It should seek to participate in the process of creating a transforming education and social systems.

A liberating education for African women will take seriously the call for curriculum changes. African education curricula need to be changed from Eurocentric, sexist, and classist blueprints to Afrocentric sources of education. A wealth of indigenous knowledge remains largely unexplored on the continent. Western generated systems of knowledge do not provide answers for African reality. Historically, these have been designed to conquer, exploit, and dominate. There is little evidence to support a paradigm shift in the nature of this historic relationship. An Afrocentric curriculum should be an integral part of the church's prophetic vision of an African egalitarian church and society.

Finally, this prophetic church should be aware that a liberating education is not an individual intellectual activity, but rather an organic exercise, an entire village initiative, and it also must borrow its instructions from a social historical praxis in order to give birth to a just world order.