



African women and spirituality: A study of narratives and agency

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements in respect of the Degree ***Doctor of Philosophy in Theology, with specialisation in Systematic Theology***, in the Department of **Historical and Constructive Theology** in the Faculty of **THEOLOGY AND RELIGION** at the University of the Free State

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October 2024

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I, **ROSE BESNART MALOWA**, declare that the thesis that I herewith submit for the *Doctor of Philosophy in Theology with specialisation in Systematic Theology Degree* at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

SIGNED:



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the loving memory of my late sister Malingose Malowa, who became a mother to my children at the time of her passing. Her selflessness and dedication during my study continue to inspire me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the Almighty God, for giving me strength and guidance during this journey. His ample grace saw me through to the end.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my husband, Humphrey, and our children Khriein, Glory, Tizza and Amaya Mwango, for their unwavering support and the sacrifices they made throughout my studies. Your patience and understanding have been invaluable.

To my parents, Mr and Mrs Malowa, and all my siblings. Your constant encouragement became the ladder I climbed when I felt like giving up. Your faith in me propelled me forward, even in my moments of doubt.

I am deeply grateful to the Reformed Church in Zambia, particularly the RCZ Chilanga congregation, for their spiritual support and prayers. My sincere appreciation also goes to the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, for their generous financial and material support that made this journey possible.

Special thanks to Dr Gideon Van Der Watt, for encouraging me to pursue this doctorate, and to Dr Nico Mostert, for his guidance and support.

Finally, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my promotor, Prof. Rian Venter. Without his expertise, patience, and support, I would not have completed this challenging journey. His mentorship has been instrumental in shaping both this thesis and my growth as a researcher. I also extend my appreciation to my co-promotor, Prof. Juanita Meyer, for her guidance. The two consultations in Lusaka deserve special mentioning.

I offer my sincere thanks to all those mentioned and to the many others who have supported me along the way. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

ABSTRACT

The background to this thesis is the pervasive religiosity of women in Africa, as well as the social and academic turn to spirituality. Some scholarship on the spirituality of African Christian women has already been produced. This research explores a hiatus in the current knowledge, by focusing on the notions of 'narrative' and 'agency'. The central research focus addresses the question as to whether narrating a spiritual journey could contribute to the empowerment and enhancement of women's agency. In the Introduction, the notions of 'agency' and 'narrative' are explained with reference to applicable scholarship and these prove that there is substantial evidence for the current interest in these categories of interpretation in both the humanities and theology. Five secondary questions structure the layout of the research and explore specific dimensions of the research focus. In Chapter 1, the plight of women in Africa and, more specifically, in Zambia and in the church is discussed. The Chapter concludes that, despite commendable changes, patriarchy still deeply inhibits women's agency. This justifies the approach of this study of the spirituality of women. Chapter 2 attends to the developments in spirituality as academic discipline over the past few decades and opens perspectives to approach this research, and to redress a weakness in much of the reflection on the spirituality of African women. Chapter 3 investigates the current state of scholarship on African womanist spirituality, with reference to general African and feminist spirituality, and to specific proposals by African female scholars. Significant emphases and motifs emerge, as well as the significant contribution by the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians. The quest for agency is pervasively present, but often in the form of referencing to related terms such as empowerment, liberation, identity, and autonomy from the same semantic domain. The discussion is not about the central role of story-telling. The explicit proposal of this thesis to approach African womanist spirituality from the combined and explicit perspective of agency and narrative is evidently a scholarly contribution. Chapter 4 makes another contribution, by selecting autoethnography as additional research methodology to literature study. This proves to be a most applicable approach to retrieve marginalised voices and to attend to the continued impact of culture on the life of African women. Chapter 5 is an application of this method, and presents the personal story of the researcher about her own spiritual journey, her struggle to assert her agency, the critical role of communality in the form of the Church Women Fellowship, and the importance of the Nsenga culture. The Conclusion to the study analyses the personal narrative and answers the central and secondary questions of the research. The research persuasively argues that there is an intricate connection between womanist spirituality, agency, and narrative. This makes a substantial contribution to the current study of African womanist spirituality. Finally, some suggestions are made on the further

study of agency and narrative in spirituality, and on the role of constructive theology, especially trinitarian theology.

KEYTERMS: Agency, autoethnography, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, narrative, patriarchy, Reformed Church in Zambia, spirituality, women's fellowship, Zambia

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INTRODUCTION

1. RESEARCH INTEREST AND BACKGROUND

Throughout history and in cultures, women have experienced many forms of oppression from systematic discrimination to social injustices. The church and the Bible act as pillars of consolation and conviction in the lives of many women, who find strength and comfort in their faith despite these obstacles. Statistics have consistently revealed a trend where a significant majority of church attendees are women, a fact that has been confirmed in my two decades of service as a minister of the Word and sacraments. Over my years of ministerial experience, it has become evident to me that women form the predominant group of individuals who faithfully gather in church every Sunday, seeking solace, guidance, and spiritual nourishment. These women, who come from a variety of backgrounds and who have diverse experiences, meet to share a common story that explores issues of domestic violence, poverty, political marginalisation, and religious restrictions. Their combined voices are filled with stories of the oppression they experienced in their lives. This research concerns *women, oppression, spirituality, and narratives*, which are intimately intertwined, and their *agency*.

1.1 Culture, tradition and patriarchy

Culture greatly influences the dynamics that allow gender-based violence to flourish in societies. Deeply rooted cultural and social norms, which create a societal perception that men belong in positions of authority, shape males to exhibit traits of aggression, dominance, emotional detachment, and the need for control. Likewise, women are frequently pushed to be passive, compassionate, submissive, and emotionally vulnerable. This reinforces the notion that women belong in roles characterised by weakness, lack of authority, and reliance on men for safety and security. The unequal power dynamics between men and women that denotes this type of socialisation has inculcated a societal preference for violence, which, in turn, has normalised such behaviour. Unfortunately, women have carried the brunt of maintaining these harmful cultural norms for generations, passing them down from one generation to the next. A cycle of inequality that endures over time has been perpetuated by the persistence of gender-based power imbalances, which have inculcated negative tendencies and limited opportunities. During the initiation rite in Zambia (*chilangizo*), girls are traditionally taught that their primary role revolves around domestic responsibilities such as managing the household, bearing children, and nurturing their offsprings. As a result, women have historically assimilated societal expectations that tend to confine and limit their autonomy, perpetuating a culture of internalised oppression among them.

We are all heirs of traditions that shape and structure our perceptions based on power dynamics and hierarchies. In many societies, the perpetuation of male dominance over females continues to influence the way in which we view the world, where male-centred experiences, symbols, and perspectives are considered the standard of humanity. This systemic dominance, known as patriarchy, extends across both public and private spheres, dictating societal norms and expectations. Feminists often use the term 'patriarchy' to highlight and challenge these power imbalances in the relationships between men and women, shedding light on the need for gender equality and recognition of diverse experiences and perspectives. Therefore, as a complex system of male dominance and female oppression, patriarchy serves as a crucial theoretical framework for feminists to analyse and critique social structures. By treating patriarchy not only as a term, but also as a powerful conceptual tool, feminists aim to investigate the lived experiences and struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Patriarchal ideology defines the system of domination as the basis of female subjugation. This ideology thrives upon, and is sustained by systems of hierarchy, domination, and control. Women are viewed as inferior to men. The patriarchal society places men over women. Even in matrilineal societies, where descent is traced through the mother, women do not have power. "It is very important to make it clear from the outset that matrilineal societies are not matriarchal, although one finds more women with power and authority and more aspects that dignify women in [a] matrilineal society than in a patrilineal one." (Phiri 1997:13). The reason for this is that, in these societies, the uncle holds sway over women's lives. Matriarchal societies cannot replace patriarchal societies. Traditionally, women's role is to serve the needs and desires of men. Women were not considered to have a life except in relation to a man, whether father, brother, husband, or son. Women knew that their worth and respect would only come if they were a wife or a mother. These roles restricted women to a certain position and never allowed them to discover more about themselves. This explains why women are still viewed as properties of men who father them and marry them.

1.2 The impact of the missionary era

The European missionaries came to Africa with the aim of preaching the Gospel, but in the process displaced the African (traditional) religion. Prior to the coming of the missionaries, Africans understood God as being involved in human activity. God was never absent in their lives. The European missionaries were aware of the fact that the African concept of God was different from their understanding. However, their message was incorporated within the African God by the African people. This created confusion. Oredein (2017:128) observes that, "[t]hough African culture allowed space for complexity of religious expression, the Western worldview had no intention of adding

Africa's religious thoughts to their own thought-world but instead moved to replace African worldview with their own. This became an issue". Their interest, not an African interest, in supremacy was at stake: "European missions were most interested in pushing their cultural expression of God onto the Africans they encountered." (Oredein 2017:128). This was the beginning of many problems for the African people. The missionaries' message was very clear – they came to preach the message of superiority, "[a]nd in this action, Western Christian culture, not necessarily Christianity as a faith practice, claimed itself superior to African religious culture" (Oredein 2017:128). They claimed God's authority in their missionary work. The missionaries' involvement in Africa did unify people, but was also accompanied by their dominant position. This fuelled the already existing problems among the Africans. The issues of hierarchy that existed in the African cultures became more pronounced. This left women with a different message about the concept of God. "Christian religious attempts at African cultural reframing not only reinforced notions in hierarchical structures already present within [the] African system of sociality, but also opened the door for African men to experience the unjust treatment and invisibility that many African women had already been subjected to." (Oredein 2017:128).

Western cultures have mostly furthered a dualist approach to life. This was their message as they planted churches in Africa. When a woman is to carry any meaning, her origin and what influenced her life must first be investigated. It is obvious that, historically, women's spirituality centred on being a wife and a mother. Nowadays, African women are seeking to change this view and trying to redefine spirituality in their own way. African women's interpretation of spirituality includes a spirituality that is inclusive, *a holistic spirituality*. This is why women are standing up against historical injustices, crying to their God. The vast majority of African women attend prayer meetings in search of answers and direction. They talk to God about their problems and misfortunes. Most of the times, women cry in their prayers and this is a cry for life, a cry for liberation.

1.3 Christianity as oppressive and empowering to women

The understanding of the divine order of creation, which stresses that man was created first and the woman was formed from the rib of man, places women in an inferior position. A man is considered to be superior to a woman, but also closer to God. According to Shaw and Lee (2012: 596), "[t]he notion of women's inferiority is often supported by creation myths that embed women's inferior status in the religious¹ community's narrative of identity; these are the stories a religious community tells about itself in order to make itself known to both members and the outside community". This

¹ "Christianity" and "religion" are used interchangeably in this section.

narrative has caused women to be service providers to men and never to seek to rule over a man. Hence, the vast majority of women would never dream of holding positions held by men, as this would suggest that they want to replace or be like men. Women who seem to challenge this belief are considered to be stubborn and never to be taken in as women.

The second lower status is the exclusion of women from administering *sacred rituals*. In some traditions, like the Catholic, women are not allowed to celebrate the Eucharist, or pray in public. Women have had to go an extra mile to prove a point that they too have been called. According to Shaw and Lee (2012: 597), “[o]ne argument for the exclusion of women from priesthood has been that the priest stands as a representative of God, and a woman cannot represent God because she is female”. Only men can represent God because they are viewed as more godlike than women. When such notions are embraced, women continue to suffer exclusion at the expense of men.

Thirdly, Christianity continue to be regarded as oppressive to women through the *church laws* that often tell women to always submit to their husbands. Such laws ultimately keep women in abusive relationships. Even when the woman’s life is in danger, she will be required to submit, as this is her calling and God’s given role. Shaw and Lee (2012: 597) add: “Women may be told by church authorities that their role in the home is to be the support person for the husband and to submit to his divinely ordained authority in the home.” This perpetuates the abuse of women and, in some instances, leads to death.

Fourthly, women have been *accused of bringing sin* into the world. Religion has taught that women sin and bring death; they should thus not lead men. Women are naturally sinful. Ultimately, the vast majority of women neither appreciate nor even celebrate their existence as women. The church has always taught that there is something wrong with women. The impact of this has been vast, for example, in terms of self-image. But this also motivated women to seek deliverance and attend church gatherings in large numbers.

Women will not keep silent, but the time has come for them to interrupt the silence. One such organisation is the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*.²

Religion has something *good to offer* to women, despite the long history of oppression. A notable aspect is that religion has provided an environment in which women can experience community with other women. In other words, the church provides *a home for women* where their connections with each other strengthen them.

² This will be discussed later in the dissertation.

Christianity may give women a place where they find a sense of worth as valued persons, where they can celebrate their femininity and hence, become empowered. Most of the teaching deals with identity, meaning, and purpose. The fact that the majority of women belong to various Christian traditions clearly indicates that *this religion can enhance agency*. The Reformed Church in Zambia and its Women's Fellowship records a large number of women joining the fellowship. This means that religion has a force and can guarantee agency. African women are rediscovering themselves by responding to aspirations of African women for the symbolic and spiritual significance through maternal identity as a source of new life rooted in relationship, care for the other, and nurturing to transform communities. It is imperative for women to be liberated from patriarchal domination and the exaggerated preoccupation of motherhood, so that their identity and leadership can emerge and flourish in both the church and society. Women are mothers of life, intelligent and competent leaders, educators endowed with gifts of the Spirit, and capable of celebrating and affirming that in which they believe. It can be argued that, from Africa's own cultures and traditions, from a new spirituality, women can discover resources that affirm their role in both the church and society. It is safe to say that women are now focusing on identifying the foundations and moulding *a new spirituality* based on their experiences and the many stories they share.

1.4 Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, narratives, and agency

Despite the experiences of oppression, women continue to assert themselves. Women have formed circles and groupings to which they reflect and challenge some of these oppressions. One such group is the Circle Of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereinafter, the Circle).³ The Circle was formed in Ghana in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. It comprises women from different contexts within Africa, women whose lives are influenced by the African culture with the aim to reject all kinds of oppression and injustices that women undergo and the teaching that women are inferior to men. Instead, they declare that sexism within the church may be a sin. "Through reading the Bible with new eyes, they need [to] affirm[ed] that they're equal with men within the church and society" (Phiri 1997:148). In several contexts and in their own countries, women have formed groups and are discussing the way in which to rediscover their identities through workshops and seminars. Members of the Circle seek to ascertain themselves beyond the normal patriarchal interpretation of a few passages of the Bible. They are learning to investigate these interpretations and expose negative sexist designations that burden women with guilt and condemnation. The gathering of these women provides a space and platform where they feel they belong and *tell their stories* by reflecting on their *experiences* in their different contexts. As African women, they emphasise the

³ For a description of the Circle, see Chapter 3.

right to speak for themselves and to be respected by all. In these gatherings, a different narrative has helped shape the understanding of a woman's status. The *telling of stories* and the *enhancement of agency* are the outstanding features and achievements of the Circle.

Much have been written on the theme of spirituality, but what necessitates this research is to seek a spirituality that will address the problems women face at present. Its theological task is to uncover what spirituality means and how this is important to women. Spirituality is a narrative process, as it deals with meaning. We cannot speak about spirituality without considering the fact that it is an integral part of our personhood. It involves our personal, relational well-being as well as our individual cultural identity. *Telling stories* has proven to be one of the most appropriate frameworks in a healing process and stands out as a powerful tool of experience for individuals to build a sense of self-identity. Mampane (2022:10) observed this fact in her research among Pentecostal churches in her town: "Their stories show us the different ways in which they choose to interact with discourses of their respective churches, and how even in silence they stand in resistance to that which means to oppress them.". Engaging in narratives can grant women the power to challenge the powers of patriarchy. Story-telling enables women to rediscover their identity. It is a powerful tool that can transform women from being passive and victims of patriarchy to becoming participants of change, free from the painful experiences of the past.

1.5 Plight of women, spirituality, narrative, and agency

The above brief descriptions of the position of women in terms of the African culture, of the missionary movement, of religion as such, and of the establishment of the Circle become the stories of women who tell their plight. But these are also stories of their spirituality, and of their resisted and regained agency. This research intends to engage with these stories and investigate some of these dimensions in more detail, especially the spirituality of women, and how they can give expression to their agency and enhance their self-determination. The research uses a central notion and the activity of the Circle – that of story-telling or narrative – to make it one of the focal points. The restoration of the full humanity of women in Africa is studied from the perspective of their *spirituality*, with a focus on *agency* and *narrative*. These are the *broad parameters* and the *specific focus* of this research.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Nowadays, more and more women are seeking what it really means to be an African woman or girl. Even though Christianity occupies a complicated space in the lives of many women, statistics show that more women than men attend prayer meetings. This is true when it comes to church services

on Sundays, because women seek new approaches to understanding who they really are. When women approach the Bible in the context of prayer, they come as persons who long to find a sense of acceptance and self-understanding before God. They yearn to find in God's Word a spirituality that speaks to their experience and that helps them fulfil their destiny as human beings. Since women have experienced *exclusion*, they are seeking a spirituality "born out of the womb" of their *own experience*. The Circle helps women find their own path of liberation. This means challenging the dehumanising elements and replacing them with positive ones. This is at the heart of women's spirituality. The key goals are to empower women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their country, and the church.

The spirituality of women is real and plays a major role in their lives. At the same time, the wide and pervasive powers that oppress women and prevent them from determining their own lives in freedom are also real. The Circle has enabled women to tell their stories so that they can assert their agency. The focus of this research is to bring these themes together and link the position of African women, their *spirituality*, and then specifically their *stories*, and how that can enhance their *agency*.

The general problem will focus on the link between the plight of women, their spiritual journeys, and the stories of their yearning. The ***fundamental problem*** to be addressed is ***whether spirituality and the narrating of spiritual journeys could contribute to the empowerment, liberation, and ultimately enhancement of the agency of women.***

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research problem basically has *four interrelated themes*: the situation of African women, the spirituality of African women, the idea of story-telling or narrative, and agency. To develop a systematic argument, ***five specific secondary questions*** are raised and addressed correspondingly in five chapters.

- How would we describe the *position of women* in Africa and more specifically in Zambia?
- How should *spirituality* and its various dimensions be understood in light of contemporary scholarship?
- What are the features of the *spirituality of Christian women in Africa*, in relation to African and feminist spirituality in general, according to the available scholarship?
- What is *autoethnography* and could it be an applicable method to study the spirituality of women in Africa, especially with a focus on narrative and agency?
- What is *one story*, that of the researcher herself, and how will it assist in linking spirituality, narrative, and agency?

These secondary questions are addressed in the respective chapters as *primary tasks*.

4. LITERATURE AND THE STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP

This study is primarily a *literature study*, with a limited use of one qualitative method, *autoethnography*. As explained above in the section on secondary research questions, it has become clear that the focus is on *thematic groups* – the general study of women in Africa and specifically in Zambia, on spirituality as an academic discipline, on the various forms of related spiritualities (African, feminist and African womanist), and on autoethnography. This is clearly a multi- and interdisciplinary approach, and a fairly demanding task for the researcher to reflect the immense scope of academic scholarship on these themes.

An attempt is made to use applicable and *relevant* material in each chapter that addresses a specific sub-theme and to interact with standard and *recent* studies. Care is taken to engage with scholars who have become noted for their work in the respective fields, for example, Schneiders, Waaijman and Sheldrake in spirituality, as well as Oduyoye and Phiri in African womanist theology.⁴ It has become clear that theological traditions in South Africa are very strong and specific attention is paid to studies on agency and narratives in that country, for example, by Maluleke, Nadar, and Klaasen.⁵ Careful attention is also paid to older women such as Rakoczy who write on African spirituality, but also to younger ones such as Kobo.

In the various chapters, a number of insights will become clear about the states of scholarship:

- A great deal has already been written, in general, on women in Africa and this scholarship is overwhelming.
- Less has been written on women in Zambia, but excellent recent studies by, for example, the World Bank (2023) and Pesa (2023) are available.
- The interest in spirituality is a fairly recent phenomenon, but the available literature on the academic study is growing and excellent material is available (see Chapter 2).
- The interest in African, feminist, and African womanist spirituality is growing. A fair number of studies are available and allow good interaction. The specific foci of this research, on narrative and agency, is clearly an area that deserves detailed research. This underlines the *justification for this research project*.
- The interest in autoethnography is relatively new. It is increasingly realised that this research method is particularly applicable to retrieve marginalised stories and suppressed knowledge.

⁴ References will be given when the works are engaged.

⁵ See previous footnote.

Some good material is already available (see Chapter 4), also with a focus on Africa and even Zambia (see Shikulpilwa 2018). Its use as a method for studying spirituality has not been explored. This research will arguably be *innovative* in this regard.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Feminist theory, framework and methodology

The *theoretical framework* of this research must, in general, be placed in the way in which feminist theology is done and specifically how African women approach this task. This presupposes certain points of departure and also understandings of knowledge as such.

The *method of feminist theology* is widely understood as *critique*, *historical retrieval*, and *theological reconstruction* (Carr 1993:9-13). The male-centredness of the tradition is emphasised and critically discussed, and the position of women as one of oppression and exploitation is discussed. The second step moves beyond victimhood and uncovers how women have functioned as agents, most often unnoticed and devalued. Finally, the third move is to reshape the tradition, by reconstructing central theological notions. The *experience* of women, as source for doing theology, is central in this approach. Carr (1993:25) emphasises that feminist theology brings a specific angle of vision, which must be incorporated into theology, in order to transform theology as such.

In an article on what it means to do feminist research in an African context, the African feminist scholar Mama (2011:10) talks about a “consistency” in epistemological assumptions. Mama (2011:13) emphasises the pressure on women to work according to “positivist assumptions”, but she points out, “our means (research methods and practices) to be compatible with the ends (liberatory and transformative)”. For this reason, priority is given to previously neglected narratives, or story-telling. This means that there is a recognition of subjectivity (Mama 2011:14). The mother of African womanist theology, Oduyoye (2001:10), makes this link between methodology and story-telling explicit. Story has been accepted as a source for doing theology. “It has taken the feminist movement to bring back the personal into academic studies and thereby revive the importance of the story.” (Oduyoye 2001:11).

Phiri and Nadar (2010) take the discussion forward with their debate on a “theoretical framework” for African theologies and identify *seven key features* that are relevant to this research (Phiri & Nadar 2010:218-226):

- *Feminist cultural hermeneutics*. African feminist theology is fundamentally hermeneutical, as it analyses and interrogates African culture/s. The idea is to identify what is “life-affirming” and what is “life-denying”.
- *Narrative theology*. “African womanist theologies are primarily a narrative theology” (Phiri & Nadar 2010:221). Story-telling becomes a source for doing theology.
- *Theological and social advocacy*. When doing theology, the issue is to transform society.
- *Communal theology*. African womanist theologies are theologies of relations and mutuality. Hierarchies are rejected. Theology is done in community and the Circle is an excellent example of where this happens.
- *The complex role of the Bible*. There is a certain “closeness” between the Bible and African culture, but the Bible should be interpreted in a liberative manner beyond indicating simplistic parallels.
- *Race, class and gender*. Oppression of women has many dimensions which makes it unique. Often, these different forms of oppression are also interconnected. Hence, the need for an interdisciplinary approach.
- *Multi-faith nature*. This is still a small part of the work of the Circle and should receive more attention.

Much of what Phiri and Nadar have identified is relevant for the study of spirituality, especially the focus on culture, narrativity, advocacy, communality, the Bible, and the intersectionality of oppression.

The method used in this study is primarily *a literature study*, complemented by *autoethnography*. The available work on women in Africa, and on spirituality and women is studied in detail. The researcher uses an autoethnographic approach to best explore her spiritual journey as an African Nsenga/Christian woman from Zambia who is also a member of the *Chigwirizano cha azimai*, the Women’s Fellowship of the Reformed Church in Zambia. She was raised in a specific culture and religious context. Spirituality does not exist in isolation; it includes our environment, community, cultural context, and religion. These all play a vital role in shaping our spirituality.

Focusing the study on narrative and agency is in line with the views of especially Oduyoye (2001), Mama (2011), as well as Phiri & Nadar (2010). This is further discussed in sub-section 6 on agency and narrative. The focus is on experience and subjective narratives. The decision to use autoethnography is fairly innovative, but it fits exceptionally well with the approach of African feminist theology.

Autoethnography is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. A brief introduction follows. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that incorporates the author's personal experiences in relation to external factors such as the environment and various aspects of the past, present, and future. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011:1) define autoethnography as follows: "It involves both personal experience and research that connects the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethno) by examining in writing (graphy) the role of the self in a cultural context." Autoethnography can take many forms, including indigenous ethnography, reflexive ethnography, layered accounts, and personal narrative. I have chosen to use personal narrative which is told by the author herself. This entails personal experiences shared in an evocative way. These personal narratives try to connect the story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings. "These often are the most controversial forms of autoethnography for the traditional social scientist, especially if they are not accompanied by more traditional analysis and/or connection to scholarly literature" (Ellis *et al.* 2011:7). Autoethnography as research method is thus a form of autobiographical writing. The researcher becomes a participant in the study. Guiding the researcher through a process informed by autoethnography and personal narratives brings about much-needed insight into the researchers' own experience that will be key in the researcher's development and may help change some of women's negative experiences.

My story-telling begins many years ago when I decided to study theology and the struggles I went through to be accepted as a minister. The journey is about my own existential (religious) experience with the Divine and my social experiences amidst the male patriarchy. Sharing this story may grant women the power to challenge the patriarchal structures. They may retrieve their own voices amidst their struggles. In terms of her research with some Pentecostal women, Mampane (2022:10) writes that "[t]heir stories show us the different ways in which they choose to interact with the discourses of their respective churches, and how even in silence they stand in resistance to that which means to oppress them". As the first female minister in the Reformed Church in Zambia, I have proved that, in my struggles, I have made breakthroughs that express freedom and the actualisation of my dignity as a woman. This approach of women sharing and narrating their stories is a powerful experience that provides change for women, by acquiring a heightened understanding of who they are. In the process, society is changed into appreciating the nature of women as equally sharing the image of God. Society not only changed in respecting women, but we learn to value and treat women in the correct manner.

I use *literature* on the subject of spirituality with special interest in African women's spirituality for "*data*". I also use my personal experience to generate data. According to Chang (2011:13), "[a]utoethnography is a qualitative research method that enables researchers to use their

autobiography and contextual data to gain a hermeneutical understanding of the societal context and, in turn, a sociocultural meaning of self". Applying autobiography is both the methodological process and the product itself. An autoethnographic analysis, when applied, involves the telling of the conversation, the writing and self-reflection, as the process unfolds. Furthermore, according to Chang (2011:15), "self-data that they collect about themselves become the foundation for analysis and interpretation and a window through which they explore to understand their sociocultural context of the external world".

The researcher is interested in a number of questions that will assist in addressing the major research question and that will inform the telling of the personal story. Here are some of the questions:

- What are the *challenges* I experience as a woman in my context?
- What *things do I do* to express my Christian faith?
- How best do I describe my *spiritual journey* with the Lord?
- Has my spiritual journey *helped* me cope, given me a sense of belonging and freedom to make my own decision about my life as a woman in my context? Has it enhanced my agency?

5.2 Disciplinary positioning of study

Since the emergence of the renewed interest in spirituality as academic field of study in the 1960s, the question has been raised about its relation to the other theological disciplines. According to the traditional theological encyclopedia the question can be raised about the department in which it should be placed. In the standard book on spirituality, Perrin (2007) discusses spirituality in various chapters, and from various perspectives. For example, he devotes chapters to the questions of God, Christian anthropology, Christian history, texts and practices. This clearly conveys the multi-dimensionality of spirituality, or its *multi-disciplinary nature*. It can be discussed in terms of Old and New Testament, Church History, Systematic Theology or Practical Theology. At the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of the Free State one can undertake postgraduate studies in spirituality in one of several departments, depending on the available supervisory capacity or the specific thematic interest of the student.

This specific study was undertaken in the Department of Constructive and Historical Theology. There are several reasons for that. The prior, master's degree, studies by the student, was completed in this department on the theology of Mercy Oduyoye. The study-leader was also well acquainted with the Zambian context as he worked in that context for more than eighteen years. Furthermore, there

is a strong interface in the study between spiritual experience and theological ideas. In a recent study the well-known theologian McGrath (2024:11, 25) understands doctrine as “a new way of seeing things” and continues that this results in “a new manner of living”. This is precisely at stake here.⁶ Feminist or womanist theologies belong in the disciplinary field of systematic theology. Trinitarian theology would also receive attention in the discussion of spirituality. One further motivation can be mentioned. The notion of “narrative” functions prominently in the study, and is closely linked with anthropology as such, that is, the formation of the self and not with pastoral theology. Because the study uses one specific qualitative method, that of auto-ethnography, a second specialist was involved because of her expertise in research methodologies. The disciplinary positioning of the study and the supervisory involvement serve the focus of the study and can be accounted for.

5.3 Ethical considerations of autoethnography

There are benefits in applying autoethnography as a research, but at the same time, there are also challenges that accompany it, because it focuses so much on the self and avoids others. The researcher is considered both a subject and an object, making him/her the centre of investigation. This brings into view the question of *validity*. The question is: How do we ensure that the story is authentic? According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011:9), “[f]or an autoethnographer, the question of reliability refers to the narrator’s credibility”. The answer lies in humility, sacrifice, and selflessness at the centre of my desire to share, but secondly, it can be said that most of the women and audience will relate and connect with my story. This is the goal of autoethnography. Ellis *et al.* (2011:10) state that “[f]or autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent”.

The second ethical consideration is the reputation of the teller. I am a minister of the Word and sacraments in the Reformed Church in Zambia and I am also a member of the *Chiligwizano cha amai*, which is the largest fellowship with many members. My position affords me the opportunity to operate within a community that is well known to me. I have been a minister for over 22 years and a member of the women’s fellowship for over 12 years. In the process of telling stories, feelings and emotions of criticism or shame are expressed. My reputation might be at stake, considering the position I hold, but this cannot be compared to the impact that this story may bring, because writing

⁶ See also the section 2.5 on *Spirituality and Theology* for further discussion.

personal stories makes witnessing possible. It still remains a challenge, since the aim of autoethnography is to be honest when sharing experiences. In short, we cannot run away from sharing the facts of the story, even if it may bring guilt and shame. Oduyoye (2001:21) writes movingly that the telling of stories makes us vulnerable, but “without this sharing we cannot build community and solidarity”. As a researcher sharing my experience, I try to be as honest as possible, leaving no facts behind that may need sharing so that someone out there can relate to and be encouraged.

Thirdly, in trying to recreate the past, it may be difficult to move forward and perhaps the reader might be left discouraged or wondering whether the shared experience is helpful or not. The aim of autoethnography is to inspire others. This is the reason why I share my experience to affect others and bring healing. “The aim of autoethnography is to recreate the researcher’s experience in a reflexive way aiming at making a connection to the reader about his own experience” (Méndez 2013:284). My aim is to see others get inspired and see the urgency of the matter.

6. CENTRAL TERMINOLOGY - AGENCY AND NARRATIVE

In this section, I explain the concepts of ‘agency’ and ‘narrative’ that are central in this research. I approach these difficult terms by carefully noting various scholars’ opinions about them. This intentionally selected approach allows us to listen to an array of voices on agency and narrative. Towards the end of each discussion, I give a distilled summary as basis for this research.

6.1 Agency

By way of introduction, I briefly describe the term ‘agency’ as used in *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts* (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2013:9). The term ‘agency’ refers “to the ability to act or perform an action”. However, the question is whether this is done in freedom, or whether “the things they do are in some sense determined by the way in which their identity has been construed”. The second qualifying part, in particular, conveys the plight of women.

The article by the prominent South African theologian **Maluleke** (2000) is widely viewed as a seminal contribution to indicate a new direction for theology. Maluleke (2000:28) explicitly refers to “a new wave of awareness of the agency of ordinary marginalized Africans”. When he wrote the article in 2000, he was interested in the main lines of an emerging post-cold war and post-apartheid paradigm of doing African theology. In the older framework of doing theology, there was a “recognition of Africa’s massive victimisation and exploitation” (Maluleke 2000:23). Maluleke (2000:28-32) identifies ten lines that disclose the contours of the emerging paradigm. Some of the main ones can

be mentioned in this instance. There is a “less embittered and less schizophrenic relationship” with the painful Christian past. There is an attempt to seek new metaphors to replace worn-out ones. The most dynamic forms of prophetic praxis are found among African women (Maluleke 2000:31). Maluleke then turns to his main focus in the article – agency. The “poor” are no longer regarded as helpless victims without intellectual and spiritual resources. This leads Maluleke (2000:31-32) to speak of the “rediscovery of the agency of Africans”, and “the agency of African Christians and the African poor is being rediscovered, explored and respectfully interpreted”. This is the most creative element of the emerging new paradigm. Maluleke (2000:27) refers to the “different gaze at Africa [that] zooms in on Africa’s creative, innovative and *agentic* spirit”. He gives as examples the African Independent Churches (AIC) and the Circle. Women are not “passive, brainwashed and duped members of African societies”. Maluleke (2000:32) describes agency most excellently: “They are resisting agents who are taking the initiative”. The role of theology is to *acknowledge, valorise, interpret, and enhance* the agency of African Christians in their daily struggles against different cultural, religious, and economic forces (Maluleke 2000:22). In the context of this renewed emphasis on agency, Maluleke emphasises his appreciation of biblical hermeneutics. He considers the work done in this regard “as the most enduring contribution of black theology to African Theology” (2000:24). Maluleke cautions that, when the agency of ordinary Christians is recognised, we should not glorify or romanticise it. Maluleke particularly appreciates Mosala and his work on biblical hermeneutics and his critical recognition of the agency to be found among the AICs.

The following *five insights from Maluleke* are important for this research, namely the importance of agency; his interpretation of agency in terms of the changing role of the poor; the fourfold task of theology *vis-à-vis* agency; his appreciation of the role of women, and his emphasis on biblical hermeneutics.

Akper (2009) is interested in the question as to whether Africans could abandon their wheelchairs and “begin to walk unaided”. His article is heavily dependent on Maluleke’s work, and especially the article by Maluleke and Nader (2004). Akper (2009:114) also refers to the so-called next stage in the discourse on agency, meaning that Africans have never been passive victims of marginalisation and domination, as was presupposed in earlier discussions. Following Maluleke and Nadar, Akper (2009:115) emphasises that the poor and the marginalised are active participants in the dismantling of the ideological system that prolongs their oppression. There are certain “rules of engagement” (Akper 2009:115). For example, agency is an enduring project and not a definitive event, and attention should be paid to African female agency. For Akper, following Maluleke and Nadar, the role of White academics is problematic. He asserts an own voice when advocating a broader notion of

African agency (Akper 2009:109). Akper's unique contribution is to be found in this instance. Akper (2009:117) is not convinced that Africans can walk unaided; "African scholars and their leaders will have to wait for a while before they can attempt walking unaided" (Akper 2009:118). According to Akper (2009:118), "a more viable African agency" is at stake. He advocates a partnership model (Akper 2009:118). Both Blacks and Whites "are constituted by each other through their work" (Akper 2009:118). The perceived sense of alienation will diminish with time through engagement.

The specific *contribution* of Akper, leaning heavily on the work of other African scholars, is the notion of *partnership*. Alienation will be addressed only through interaction.

LenkaBula and Makofane's (2010) article clearly and comprehensively reflects on the agency of women in Africa. Their specific approach is the intersection of agency and governance in the public sphere, and this is examined from the perspective of feminist social ethics. They emphasise that contemporary nation states in Africa have a specific history that has been "bifurcated" (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:3,6), meaning that it has been divided between the civic and the ethnic, as in the legal system. The problem with this is that the public sphere has been "gendered" and continues "to disable and inhibit African women from active citizenship, access and participation in the public" (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:5). To them, 'agency' means the capacity to determine ourselves; it is the power for action (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:10), and a multilayered concept that includes all aspects of life. LenkaBula and Makofane (2010:12, 25) make one very important point: agency is strongly connected to *justice* – "agency is a critical component of the pursuance of justice"; justice is the "essential condition for the exercise of agency". In their argument, LenkaBula and Makofane describe how women are represented in the dominant academic discourses, and their conclusion is important. Black women are presented as "indecisive and unable to liberate themselves" (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:17), their agency is nominal, and their places are limited to the domestic spheres. Their agency is stereotyped; it is static and negated (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:18). According to LenkaBula and Makofane (2010:19), this amounts to epistemic violence. Over against this denial, inhibiting, or negation of agency, it should be asserted, affirmed, and reclaimed (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:14, 21). What is at stake for the two authors is the full participation of women in the public sphere where they are respected as equals (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:16, 25). They emphasise scholarship as one of the strategies to reclaim agency (LenkaBula & Makofane 2010:26).

The *contribution* of LenkaBula and Makofane is *fourfold*. They work with a clear understanding of *what agency means* and the verbs they attach to the notion are noteworthy. For example, agency can be denied, limited, discounted or inhibited; but it could also be affirmed, asserted, and

reclaimed. The connection with *justice* brings an ethical detail to the discussion. The emphasis on the *public sphere* is also crucial. The role of the *representation* of women in *scholarship* is critical.

Burke's article (2012) is particularly helpful. She writes as a sociologist and is interested in agency in gender-traditional religions, where we find male headship and woman's submission. This study also refers to Islam. She claims, and this is the strength of the article, that it synthesises existing feminist scholarship on agency. Burke's (2012:2) working definition refers to the capacity of women to take autonomous action in the face of cultural and structural resistance and limitation. Burke (2012:3, 14) also emphasises that agency is a contested notion in feminist scholarship, and that no one assumes that the meaning of agency is fixed or universal. Paradigms that work with strict dichotomies (liberated/subordinated) are criticised and it is widely assumed that all religious women exhibit agency in some way or the other (Burke 2012:3, 14). Her key argument is that we can distinguish *four conceptualisations* – resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and compliant agency (Burke 2012:4). Burke (2012:5-12) discusses and illustrates this with examples from Christianity and Islam. In resistance agency, there is an attempt to break free from the constraints of gender roles. We find this, for example, when women deviate from a strict dress code. We find the empowerment model when doctrines or practices are reinterpreted so that the effect on them as women is different. Women may interpret the behaviour of an ex-gay husband in terms of sin to enable them to cope with it. Sometimes women could use gender-traditional religion for some external advantage, for example, for relational or material benefit. This is regarded as instrumental agency. Burke's fourth understanding of agency is very interesting. With compliant agency, women choose to conform and practise their faith without resistance, or empowerment of instrumental use. For example, a Mormon woman could decide to use self-negation to show that she does this for the sake of God. In this instance, the dynamics are crucial. Agency is then not understood in terms of autonomy (Burke 2012:11). Burke's conclusions are important. Women and their religion in various contexts should be respected, and Western liberal notions of agency should not be forced on all women. Burke (2011:12) argues thus for an expanded understanding of agency, whereby she detaches agency from autonomy. Burke (2011:14) is realistic that such an expansion would require more research in future on the boundaries of agency and also on what the definition of 'non-agency' would mean.

Burke's article has delivered at least *three valuable insights*. Agency is a *complex and changing* notion. Her identification of *four kinds of agency* found among women of gender-traditional religion is really helpful. To delink agency from *autonomy* and expand the notion of agency is a proposal that should be considered. This brings a certain insight to the discussion.

In her article, **Haddad** (2021) acknowledges the pioneering work done by Maluleke. She engages in greater detail with the work of the Circle, which she appreciates, but she also observes some failures. When she evaluates the work done by the Circle, she mentions *three achievements* that focus on egalitarian relationships to bring about dignity and respect for women (Haddad 2021:2). There is, in the Circle, a strong tradition emphasising the dignity, resilience, and independence of women. This is why there is an emphasis on stories of resistance (Haddad 2021:3). There has been an emphasis on agency to bring healing and to build alternative communities. The healing is especially associated with gender-based violence, and with new communities on the establishment of bonds of sisterhood. Haddad (2021:3) understands agency in light of these three areas – “three broad areas that frame the work on agency”. Consequently, agency is understood in terms of egalitarian relationships, new forms of community, and healing. Haddad brings to the discourse *two new perspectives*: the notion of intersectionality and the idea of #Blessed Community. The Circle has not paid attention to the intersection between women, culture, patriarchy, and economic systems (Haddad 2021:2). Her article focuses on #Blessed Community, which refers to young women who seek out transactional sex with older men for economic reasons, that is, an opulent lifestyle (Haddad 2021:2). In this instance, young women display a particular agency in terms of their bodies. The problem is that this form of agency does not free them from patriarchy; they remain trapped in “econo-patriarchy” (Haddad 2021:2). Haddad’s (2021:3) conclusion is noteworthy: “not all agencies bring liberation from unjust systems”. Agency could be used to collude with or resist patriarchy (Haddad 2021:4). Haddad advocates a “re-framing” of agency in the intersectional dynamics of patriarchy, economy, and sexuality.

Haddad taught us the following *four perspectives*. She interprets the work of the Circle *and agency* in terms of relationships, healing, and community. Agency could be *ambiguous*: it could collude with or resist patriarchy. The notion of *intersectionality* gives recognition to the various dimensions of women’s lives. This underlies the complexity of oppression and the quest for liberation and agency. With her discussion of #Blessed Community, Haddad brings to scholarly attention how patriarchy could be entangled with both economic dependence and sexuality.

The task now is to *summarise* and *integrate* the various *insights* on agency highlighted by these scholars. Ten emphases can be mentioned:

- “Agency” is the best *notion* to apply when thinking about the position of women in Africa. The decision to link spirituality with agency is a valuable way to undertake innovative research.

- It is important *how* women are *represented*. There is clearly a shift away from thinking about women as passive and as victims. Despite immense obstacles, women are active subjects who negotiate their agency.
- There is not a simple and uniform *definition* for agency, as it is a complex concept. It is generally associated with autonomy, the freedom to act and to make decisions for ourselves, despite many forms of limitation. We should, however, bear in mind that some individuals who work in gender-traditional contexts could view this as a Western interpretation (see Burke).
- Agency can be denied, limited, and discarded, but it could also be asserted, nurtured, and reclaimed. To think about the task of theology in terms of *acknowledging*, *valorising*, *interpreting*, and *enhancing* is a constructive suggestion (Maluleke).
- To think in terms of *intersectionality* helps the discussion (Haddad). This shows the link with all aspects of life – the private and public sphere, culture, religion, politics, economy, and sexuality.
- The connection of agency with *justice* is significant (LenkaBula & Makofane). This will also enable a theological interpretation of agency.
- The role of White academics in the discourse on agency is problematic, but the plea for an expansion to *partnering* should be noted (Akper).
- It is helpful to think about agency in terms of *resistance*, *empowerment*, and *instrumentality* (Burke). This brings the many sides of agency to the fore.
- It should be realised that there could be a form of *ambiguity* in agency and it is a question as to when it becomes narcissistic (Haddad) or whether non-compliance could be a subtle form of agency in gender-traditional circles (Burke).
- It is crucial to connect agency with a specific Christian *practice* such as *biblical hermeneutics* (Maluleke). This alerts us to what could enhance and nurture agency.

6.2 Narrative

The philosopher Kearney (2002:3) begins his book *On stories* with the following words: “Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*”. This section clarifies “narrative”, as given by some scholars. The authors come from different backgrounds and write from different perspectives. This will provide the background to the remainder of the research.

That the interest in narrative theory has a long history is well described by Hyvärinen (2010). He tells of his own journey and struggle to understand what it all means. After much research, he has come to grasp that there are *four turns to narrative* (Hyvärinen 2010:72, 72-77). The first turn took place in the 1960s in the academic field of Literary Studies. It was understood that narrative has a higher

position than the other genres. The second turn happened in the study of History and this academic discipline was understood as a “narrative-making exercise”. The third turn can be linked with the Social Sciences in the 1980s. Two very important “moves” took place (Hyvärinen 2010:75). There was a shift away from “grand narratives” to small, forgotten, and untold stories, and life itself was understood in terms of narrative. This focus on narrative created the atmosphere of a new intellectual movement. The final turn, according to Hyvärinen, is a cultural one. “Narrativeness” is broader than academic turns (Hyvärinen 2010:76). Hyvärinen (2010:78) opines that it is important to distinguish between ‘story’ and ‘narrative’. ‘Story’ refers to the ‘what’, a sequence of events, whereas ‘narrative’ refers to the ‘how’, that is, the manner of delivery, for example issues such as voice, order. From Hyvärinen, *we learn* that ‘narrative’ is important to understand life, and that the academic study has come a long way since the 1960s.

The well-known African theologian **Katongole** (1998) responds to the advocacy of political leaders for an ‘African renaissance’, which he regards as nothing but a plea from above for economic liberalism. Katongole (1998:31) asks: “Where does my semi-literate, rural mother stand in this African Renaissance?” With reference to Luke 19:1-10, Katongole (1998:34) calls this the “Zaccheus syndrome”, speaking from the top of a tree, from above. This approach covers up particularity and historical specificity (Katongole 1998:34). Katongole (1998:35) pleads that theology must come to the ground – “within the realm of small stories, within the narrative context of the African’s ordinary struggles and aspirations”. A story will be judged by two aspects: the kind of social practice that it generates, and the kind of people that it produces (Katongole 1998:36). From Katongole, *we learn* the distinction between stories from above and stories from below.

The publication in 2002 of the volume *Her-stories: Hidden histories of women of faith in Africa* by **Phiri, Govinden and Nadar** was a major event in the history of the Circle and of African womanist theology. In this instance, we find an impressive embodiment of the methodology of the theology of this movement – the telling of stories by various women from different African contexts. Phiri, Govinden and Nadar’s (2002:1-13) introduction to the volume of stories is crucial and their emphases should be carefully noted. The *focus* of these stories is to call attention to the *role played* by women in the Christian heritage in Africa. When listening to these numerous stories, we cannot miss the variety of experiences, but also the similarities. There are two common features among all the stories – women are claiming the Bible in the context of Africa, and they are intensely committed to their faith (Phiri *et al.* 2002:2). Phiri *et al.* ask two cardinal questions about narrative: *Why tell a story?* and *How does one tell a story?* Their answers to these questions are crucial. Phiri *et al.* (2002:4-9) give five reasons for African women telling their stories: they complement the male-

oriented history of the church in Africa; they give a womanist perspective on the church; by telling their stories, women become participants and actors in history, and do not remain observers or victims; telling stories functions in a therapeutic manner and brings healing, and finally, the stories contribute to the transformation of the world. Telling stories is not simply about the past, but also about the future (Phiri *et al.* 2002:9). The answer to the second question about the “how” is also important. Storytelling is part of the African identity and is the distinct methodology of African women theologians. There is nothing prescriptive: “Each one of the sisters has her own distinctive style and concern” (Phiri *et al.* 2002:11). Telling stories is part of providing a legacy of resistance (Phiri *et al.* 2002:11).

Klaasen (2017) writes as a practical theologian and his own understanding on narrative theology has evolved over the years. Klaasen (2017:458) perceives a “definitive turn” to narrative in both practical theology and theology, in general, over the past four decades. It is noteworthy how he understands this interest. He links it to the dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment and how knowledge is understood. There is a move away from abstract rationality, universalism, and individualism to specific lived experiences (Klaasen 2017:459). There are different forms of narrative theology, but the “common thread” is “that persons can make sense of themselves, the world and God through stories” (Klaasen 2017:460). Human reason is not abstract; it is always “embedded in the social and cultural contexts” (Klaasen 2017:468) of people. His own approach to rationality is what he calls “experience embedded reasoning” (Klaasen 2017:469). His approach to narrative is “open-ended” and rests on the following “pillars”: reason, community, tradition, and particular experience (Klaasen 2017:470). He emphasises two notions: experience and context as fundamental for being a person (Klaasen 2017:473). From Klaasen, *we learn* two aspects: to understand the interest in narrative, we must see a reaction to the Enlightenment in the background, and the newer notion of rationality is connected to context and experience.

Nadar’s (2019) work is extremely relevant and important for this research project. As a South African theologian, she writes from a Black and feminist orientation. She also prefers to talk about “feminist” and not “womanist”. In this article, Nadar’s (2019:35) interest is Black feminist epistemology and her central questions are: What can we learn from this perspective for doing research? and What difference does it make in an African context? Narrative research is central for her. Nadar (2019:37) is aware of the fact that, in some circles, this is regarded in a negative light as “soft research”. Black feminist epistemology strongly reacts to this and calls into question that so-called “scientific research” is objective, value-free, and emotion-less (Nadar 2019:38). Nadar (2019:39) makes the following crucial statement that narrative research is “an essentially Black and feminist way of doing

research". Nadar (2019:45, n.11) distinguishes between "story" and "narrative", where the one refers to what the actor tells, and the other is the researcher's account. This interrupts scientific research practice, and it is "one of the most profound ways in which research has been given a 'human face'" (2019:37). Nadar (2019:39-44) identifies five ways in which narrative research can enhance research practice. One, it casts suspicion on master narratives of knowledge and prefers particular personal narratives. Two, it is a research tool to gather data and knowledge. Narratives are not only a way to conscientize people. Three, narrative research opposes the assumption of objectivity in science. The recognition of the impact of subjectivity is required. Four, this approach to research encourages reflexivity and positionality. Emotions are part of research and a narrative method inserts "the 'I' back into research" (Nadar 2019:43). Finally, a narrative approach contributes to change and transformation. Nadar (2019:43) emphasises that stories are told "for their power to invite us all to call deep on our courage to transform". Nadar's insights and emphases are applicable for this research. From Nadar, *we learn* about the close connection between Black feminist epistemology and research, and narrative, and that a narrative method can, in many ways, enhance research.

In a striking article, **Dinkler** (2011) connects narratives to redemption. This opens the possibility to interpret narrative in terms of the Bible and theology. Dinkler (2011:288) understands "redemption" in its original sense of the deliverance of slaves from bondage, that is, it refers to the restoration to wholeness and healing. Narrative fulfils fundamentally a "performative function" (Dinkler 2011:289); it does not mirror reality, but it creates it. At the same time, telling stories allows the private, the individualistic to become public (Dinkler 2011:290). Telling our story enables us to restore and claim our agency (Dinkler 2011:291, 292), which is required for redemption – "the teller is restored to a place of agency simply by virtue of choosing his or her own story" (Dinkler 2011:291). From Dinkler, *we learn* that the telling of our story is intimately linked to both agency and redemption, which opens a theological perspective on narrative.

As a theologian, **Downey** (2012) is interested in narrative; she converses with fellow theologians. According to Downey (2012:294), the idea of "narrative theology" started to surface from the early 1970s, and she thinks that three issues can summarise the debate in theology, namely the purpose, the particularity, and the centrality of narratives. The primary *purpose* of a narrative is not to convey information or to prove a point; it wants to deliver meaning (Downey 2012:295). This is where its power lies. Secondly, narrative focuses on diversity, *individuality*, and multiplicity. The preference is for the "fragment" and not for the universal. Thirdly, narrative should not be regarded as the only (exclusive) genre, but definitely as the *central* genre; it is not peripheral. Narrative is open to other

forms of knowledge. Downey's article summarises important dimensions in the debate on narrative. From Downey, *we learn* the distinction between facts and meaning, fragment versus the universal, and central but not exclusive.

Schechtman (2011) is a philosopher and proponent of the idea of a "narrative self". She emphasises that there are vast differences as well as many critics among scholars as to what this means. The basic point of a narrative self is twofold (Schechtman 2011:395) – our *sense* of the self is narrative, and the *lives* of selves are narrative in structure. Major philosophers such as MacIntyre, Taylor, and Ricoeur, who value the idea of selfhood and narrative, share a number of perspectives in common (Schechtman 2011:401-405). She highlights three perspectives. Narratives produce *meaning* (Schechtman 2011:402). Narratives help us interpret events and action as meaningful or significant. An *ethical orientation* is at the heart of the narrative self. Schechtman (2011:404) states that "a core element of the narrative view is an emphasis on choice, value and agency". With a narrative self, there is a certain "quest for the good". Finally, there is always a sense of being embedded in a world with others (Schechtman 2011:405): "selfhood is an essentially social concept". Schechtman (2011:406) acknowledges that there is one common "uncertainty" with the idea of a narrative self – how a narrative should be told. It may have to do with how different actual lives are (Schechtman 2011:414). From Schechtman, *we learn* the very valuable idea of a "narrative self" and how such an understanding of human life is connected with meaningfulness, agency, goodness, and embeddedness in social relations.

The *insights* acquired from these scholars can be summarised as follows:

- Narrative is important to understand life.
- The academic study of narrative has a long history since the 1960s.
- Stories from above must be distinguished by stories from below.
- The interest in narrative must be viewed as a reaction to the Enlightenment.
- The notion of rationality conveyed in narrative is connected to context and experience.
- The purpose of narratives is not to convey facts but to create meaning.
- Narrative gives priority to the particular, the fragment versus the universal.
- Narrative is a central genre, but it is open to other forms of knowledge.
- There is a close connection between Black feminist epistemology, methodology, and narrative.
- A narrative method can, in many ways, enhance research.
- Narrative is intimately linked to both agency and redemption, which opens a theological interpretation.

- Telling stories has multiple functions, namely from making a specific womanist contribution to bringing healing and transforming society.
- Story-telling is about the past and the future.
- There is nothing prescriptive about how a story is to be told.
- The notion of a narrative self opens the possibility to consider human life in terms of meaning, agency, and relationality.

7. POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

Many authors have written on the topic of spirituality, in general, but what necessitates this research is to seek a *particular spirituality* that will address the problems women face nowadays. The theological task is to uncover what spirituality means and how this is important to women. Traditionally, spirituality has been *male-focused*. However, recently, the spiritual emphasis has been on *coming into relationship* with both God and the community. This construct of spirituality involves seeking our true meaning and purpose in life and our interest in dealing with and growing in spiritual issues. It also involves our willingness to help others for the betterment of mankind.

This research attempts to redress male-oriented approaches to spirituality. The focus is intentionally on Africa, but more specifically on the *women of Africa*. The research is further delimited with a focus on my personal journey as female minister in the Reformed Church in Zambia. There is a paucity of literature *on spirituality in this way*. This is where the contribution of this research potentially lies. The contribution would focus on narratives and agency, and the use of autoethnography. To encourage people to speak and narrate their spiritual experiences is to enhance their agency.

The *potential academic contribution* can be summarised as follows:

- The research adds to knowledge about women in Africa, and more specifically about *women* in Zambia and their *spirituality*.
- The study, with its focus on agency and narrative in terms of spirituality, makes a definite academic contribution. A great deal has been written about the agency of women, of their stories and about their spirituality in a compartmentalised manner. But the *explicit combination* of these notions in this research exploration is innovative. This may chart a new trajectory in the study of African womanist spirituality.
- By adding autoethnography to agency, narrative, and womanist spirituality, a further particular and unique *methodological contribution* becomes clear. This may indicate a second major new direction to the study of African womanist spirituality, and to the study of spirituality, in general.

We can easily indicate the academic contribution. The state of scholarship shows the “knowledge gaps”. It is difficult to indicate how the research will ultimately contribute to *social transformation*. It is hoped that this research will make a possible contribution to the well-being and agency of women and to society.

8. LAY-OUT AND STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH

The research structure consists of seven chapters – an introduction, five chapters that form the heart of the argument, and a conclusion. The argument, in chapters 1-5, moves *from the general to the specific*.

INTRODUCTION

This section describes typical issues such as focus, question, methodology, and contribution.

CHAPTER 1. WOMEN IN AFRICA – A NARRATIVE OF UNREALISED AGENCY

This chapter describes the plight of women and the search for liberation, empowerment, and agency. It focuses on the continued influence of *patriarchy* on *African women*, in general, and on *women in Zambia*, in particular. Attention is paid to women in the church and the role of women fellowships.

CHAPTER 2. PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

This chapter addresses issues such as the *turn to spirituality, definition, forms, practices, and methodology* for studying spirituality.

CHAPTER 3. SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN A WIDER CONTEXT

This chapter provides an account of African spirituality, in general; of the scholarship on feminist and womanist spirituality, and of the spirituality of African women. It also pays attention to the Circle.

CHAPTER 4. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD FOR STUDYING SPIRITUALITY

This chapter discusses autoethnography as a recent research approach and as methodology in spirituality.

CHAPTER 5. THE PERSONAL SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN

In this section, the researcher tells her story, with the focus on narrative and agency. The researcher applies the method theoretically described in Chapter 4.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion answers the central research question and the secondary question. This section also discusses what has transpired from the autoethnographic exercise. There is a brief section on some suggestions about the future of spirituality for African women. The research concludes with a proposal for the role of constructive theology in the study of spirituality, in order to enhance agency.

CHAPTER 1. WOMEN IN AFRICA – A NARRATIVE OF UNREALISED AGENCY

The discussion about women, from whatever perspective, should always bear in mind their marginalisation, oppression, and discrimination. This does not in any way render them only victims, but all academic discourse should engage the reality of their plight. This study on spirituality also acknowledges this reality. We cannot engage the spirituality of women without – at least – a cursory treatment of their disadvantaged situation. The *lay-out* of this chapter consists of three segments. A brief reference is made to the global gender gap. This is followed by the focus on Africa. Finally, attention is paid to Zambia. General descriptions are given, but specific attention is also paid to the position of women in the church. The *aim* of the chapter is to emphasise and highlight a known fact: the need to reclaim, nurture, and enhance the agency of women. In this instance, one fundamental fact emerges: African womanist spirituality is part of a global narrative and it can never be appreciated without considering the struggle for empowerment, justice, and the full realisation of women's agency.

1.1 GLOBAL POSITION OF WOMEN – THE GENDER GAP

It is surprising how many detailed reports are available on the internet from major international organisations such as *The World Bank*, *The World Economic Forum*, and *The United Nations*. The position of women is studied and monitored in detail on an annual basis. By way of introduction, one such report could be cited, namely the World Economic Forum's (hereinafter, WEF) annual report on the *Global Gender Gap* (2023). This gives a statistical and factual profile of women globally in comparison to men.

The report (WEF 2023:5-8) uses four key dimensions to indicate the gap between genders – economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, as well as political empowerment. One hundred and forty-six countries were studied and scores on a scale of 0 to 100 were used to indicate the distance covered towards parity.

Some of their *major findings* include the following for the year 2023:

- The gender gap score is 68.4%.
- From 2006 (when the study started) until 2023, there was a global improvement of only 4.1%.
- At the current rate of progress, it would take 131 years to reach full parity. The worrying trend is that the overall rate of change has slowed down.

- Of the eight regions of the world, Europe has the highest score of 76.3%. Africa's score 68.2% is the sixth-highest.
- It would take Africa 102 years to close the gender gap.
- Iceland has the highest score, 91.2%. Zambia is in position 85 (of 146 countries), with 69.9%.
- In Africa's 36 countries, Zambia occupies position 17.

Such a report conveys *one undeniable fact*: the social position of women is vastly different from that of men. A study on the agency of women is thus fully justified.

1.2 WOMEN IN AFRICA – A STORY OF MANY CHALLENGES

1.2.1 General overview

Africa has dealt with a number of *social crises* such as economic issues, wars or other conflicts. African nations faced economic difficulties prior to the 2008-2009 global depression, although not as bad as previously. The crisis caused a decline in international trade and in the market for African exports of goods, and an increase in the cost of goods such as food and fuel. In addition, Africa deals with xenophobia, religious conflicts, political instability, civil wars, terrorist attacks, famine, droughts, financial instability, health pandemics, and economic recession. These crises have significantly impacted on the lives of people in Africa, impeding the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. These crises are caused by a number of factors such as outside pressure, ethnocentrism, poor leadership, corruption, mismanagement, and poor governance. In an attempt to address these problems, initiatives have been launched to support survivors of sexual assault and to advance girls' education and skills-building. Rethinking social protection policies through a gender lens is crucial for African nations to lower the poverty and vulnerability of women. According to Hingston (2016:7285), "[c]onflicts and wars also contribute to Africa's social crises. Corruption, bad governance, dissatisfaction with the ruling government, ethnic and religious differences, disagreements, the quest for power and riches, and an absolute disregard of human rights have all contributed to conflicts and wars in the African region".

Unemployment and poverty disproportionately affect African women during periods of economic downturn. Social crises on the continent, including economic issues, wars, and conflicts significantly affect their lack of economic independence and unemployment. High unemployment rates are typical during economic downturns as firms close, capital declines, and the economy as a whole collapses. As a result, a disproportionately high percentage of women lose their jobs. In addition, families are forced to reduce household expenses, due to the lack of resources during these times, causing women to go without basic amenities and to be the last to eat.

Although men and women experience high rates of unemployment, due to the collapse of structures and the departure of investors and companies, women are disproportionately impacted because they deal with additional problems such as sexual assault and exploitation. Women frequently turn to prostitution or asset sales as means of subsistence both during and after wars. This makes them even more reliant on other people and vulnerable. “The impacts of economic crisis on women are at times interwoven with the coping strategies making it troublesome to separate them” (Hingston 2016:7286). Social crises can also exacerbate violence against women and perpetuate gender inequality. Crises-related economic deprivation can render women financially dependent on men, creating power imbalances in households and a rise in violence against intimate partners. In addition to causing social structures to collapse and populations to be uprooted, wars and conflicts also foster an atmosphere that is favourable to the abuse of women.

Women are accustomed to *sacrificing* their own food intake during periods of economic uncertainty. They might discover that they have to cut back on their consumption to ensure that their families have enough to eat. These unselfish acts of putting their loved ones’ needs first is evidence of the fortitude and resiliency of women under trying circumstances, and of their steadfast devotion and commitment to the well-being of their families. Women show their resourcefulness and capacity to adjust to challenging situations by making such sacrifices. Their readiness to prioritise others is a clear indication of their affection and concern for their families. Hingston (2016:7286) adds that “[i]t is no secret that most African cultures offer the lion share of food first to men, then boys and girls. Women have been known to make do with what is left, a matter of women eating last and least”. When it comes to resources, opportunities, and decision-making authority, women frequently find themselves at the bottom of the list. This inequality is seen in household where food is little, women will put themselves last. To make ends meet, women might take on more work or participate in unofficial income-generating activities.

Some women may turn to commercial sex work under desperate circumstances, in order to survive. During social crises, African women may participate in risky *sexual behaviours* that could endanger their health. In order to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and luxuries, women and girls may engage in multiple sexual partnerships, thus increasing their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other STDs..

Girls’ circumstances are aggravated by the fact that male children are frequently given preference in African cultures in terms of *education*. Girls are, therefore, more likely to be pulled out of school in times of crisis in nations with low rates of female education and high rates of child mortality. Social

crises-related drops in household income also lead to the expulsion of girls, especially older ones, from school. Girls may be forced to leave school, due to financial hardships, and some parents may even force their daughters into young marriages in exchange for food. Their future socio-economic prospects and academic achievement are also limited.

Gender-based violence in Africa is on the rise, due to a number of social crises. First, economic downturns can result in increased household expenses that may compel women to work more hours in harder jobs, in order to keep up with price increases. Because of this greater financial burden, women may become financially dependent on their male partners, which may give men more influence over household decisions and increase the risk of intimate partner violence. Secondly, social structures collapse, unemployment rates are high, and communities are uprooted as a result of conflicts and wars. According to Hingston (2016:7287), “[m]en’s exercise of power is at times expressed in violence. Economic crisis, therefore, leads to increased violence against African women”. These elements foster an atmosphere of unpredictability and insecurity, which may lead to a rise in violence against women. Gender-based violence is aggravated by the fact that women and girls are more susceptible to sexual assaults during times of conflict.

Since 1990, sub-Saharan Africa has had the highest rate of *poverty* of any geographic region (Milazzo & Van de Walle 2017:1119). Millions of people are constantly battling to meet their most basic needs as a result of this worrying trend, which is having a devastating impact on the population. The numerous and varied underlying factors contributing to poverty in this area range from poor access to healthcare and education to political unrest and corruption. The sub-Saharan African region has experienced uneven and sluggish progress in reducing poverty, despite the efforts of governments and international organisations.

In Africa, the proportion of *households headed by women* has risen over time. The study (Milazzo & Van de Walle 2017:1120) indicates that, throughout the continent, the proportion of households led by women is increasing. According to the analysis of national household surveys, most of the sub-Saharan African countries have seen a general increase in the proportion of households headed by women. There are a few exceptions, including Ghana, Chad, the Congo, and Lesotho, where a decrease in the number of households headed by women has been noted; for the latter three countries, the change has been minimal. “In addition to its high incidence of poverty, Africa has, in the past, been singled out for the significant share of households headed by women. The literature to date has generally suggested that female-headed households tend to be poorer” (Milazzo & Van de Walle 2017:1120). The proportion of female-headed households in Africa has changed as a result of population and demographic shifts. According to the literature, the rise in female headship has

been attributed to modifications in social norms, family structure, education, as well as demographic and population characteristics. Rising educational attainment, shifting conditions, and external crises such as health, economic, and conflict, as well as the dissolution of conventional patriarchal marriages and family norm systems, have all contributed to the rise in female-headed households (hereinafter, FHHs). “Female heads are thus a diverse group, including widows; divorced, separated, and abandoned women; married women with a non-resident (polygynous or migrant) husband; single women; and mothers” (Milazzo & Van de Walle 2017:1123). In the vast majority of countries, FHHs have experienced a faster rate of poverty reduction than male-headed households (MHHs). The percentage of the impoverished residing in FHHs, however, has fluctuated over time, rising and falling at different times. Although FHHs have been largely responsible for the decline in poverty in Africa overall, their share of the change in poverty has had hardly any effect overall. However, according to recent data, poverty appears to be declining in Africa for both male- and female-headed households. In contrast to MHHs, FHHs have seen a faster rate of poverty reduction. This indicates that there has been a greater decline in poverty and improvement in living standards for FHHs. It is significant to remember that, during this time, FHH prevalence has also risen. According to Milazzo & Van de Walle (2017:1140), “[i]n three countries, FHHs accounted for the majority of the reduction in poverty (Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa). In the seven spells for which overall poverty increased, the contribution of FHHs to the increase was less than that of MHHs. Perhaps living standards have evolved differently for different types of FHHs. Some may have systematically done better due to their distinctive demographics or household structure.”

In Africa’s developing democracies, women’s *political participation* has a mixed history of successes and setbacks. Women’s political participation was extremely low until the 1950s. According to Afolabi (2017:10079), “[d]espite representing half the global population, women comprise less than 20% of the world’s legislators”. Women’s visibility in Africa’s developing democracies has been a subject of debate and concern. Women have historically been marginalised and underrepresented in African state politics. Nonetheless, there has been a noticeable upward trend in women’s representation and participation in recent years. Although it was extremely low in the early 2000s, the proportion of women in politics has steadily risen since then. Traditional customs, illiteracy, ignorance, and the legacy of colonialism⁷ were the main causes of this.

⁷ Colonialism is a major and complex theme in the study of Africa. In recent literature, one encounters several emphases. For example, Nwaka & Onu (2021) are ambiguous about the role of Western missionaries, who were both complicit in and resistant to imperialism. Ngcobo (2024) emphasizes, especially with reference to the association of patriarchy with colonialism, the negative impact on women.

African nations have made strides toward empowering women in politics; some have even elected female heads of state. Women are still underrepresented in the legislative and executive branches, and there are still issues and fluctuations with women's visibility and representation. In general, the emerging democracies in Africa acknowledge the need for greater equity and equal opportunities for women. Numerous factors have contributed significantly to the increased participation of women in African politics since the 1950s, shaping this trend. It is crucial to remember that not all African countries have experienced this increase at the same time or to the same extent. Although it has noticeably increased, the proportion of women in politics has not increased steadily over time. Instead, there have been ups and downs, with intervals of expansion and contraction. The examination of data from a few African nations reveals patterns in women's engagement in the continent's developing democracies.

Many African societies prioritise male dominance in politics, due to *patriarchal values*. Cultural norms and traditional etiquette frequently dissuade women from entering politics, because they view these as antagonistic, unwelcoming, and exclusive. According to Afolabi (2017:10080), "[p]olitics has traditionally been a male-dominated activity, which a lot of women find and consider hostile, unfriendly and exclusionary. In many African societies, patriarchal values are dominant, and traditional etiquette does not overtly favour women's participation in politics". Practical obstacles that prevent women from entering politics frequently include lack of funds, lack of education, and restricted access to information. These factors may hamper their capacity to actively engage in political processes.

Following a conflict, societies may encounter challenges such as militarism, unstable security conditions, political hegemony by a small, mostly male elite, lack of well-established political parties, and the exclusion of women from peace talks and peace-implementing organisations. These elements restrict women's ability to become political leaders.

Since gender equality has been acknowledged as important for peace-building, women's parliamentary representation in Africa's emerging democracies has significantly improved. With women representing more than the global average of 18.5% in national parliaments, many African post-conflict nations now have considerable female representation. With over 40% of parliamentary seats held by women in nations such as South Africa, Senegal, Rwanda, and the Seychelles, Africa leads the world in the advancement of women in politics. Liberia also created history by choosing Africa's first female head of state in 2005. "There are female speakers of the house in one fifth of African parliaments, which is higher than the world average of 14%. Many women now occupy key ministerial positions across Africa and the position of the wife of the President, called the First Lady,

is gaining prominence in African political discourse, even the position is un-elective” (Afolabi 2017:10079).

1.2.2 Women and the church

It is essential to explore in more detail the position of women in the church in Africa. No one could be a better guide than Isabel Phiri to give an overview. This African theologian, originally from Malawi, has established herself as one of the continent’s pre-eminent theologians.⁸ Her 2012 article gives a particular interesting and illuminating profile of women in the church in Africa.⁹ *Double ironies* characterises the position of women. Women eagerly embraced the Christian faith for its promise about freedom, in Jesus Christ, from an oppressive culture, but the embrace also resulted in the loss of their traditional (religious) leadership roles (Phiri 2012:255). Secondly, the church in Africa is statistically a church for women, as most of its members are women (Phiri 2012:264). Women have remained marginalised, even after the traditional missionary churches became independent churches led by African people (Phiri 2012:265).

Phiri’s approach to sketch the position of women in the church in Africa is fascinating. Initially, she took a historical perspective and referred to the *missionary movement*. There are obviously great differences among the various denominations that did missionary work in Africa, but both Catholics and Protestants used theology against African women (Phiri 2012:256). By emphasising Jesus’ maleness, Catholics denied women the priesthood. Conservative hermeneutics, highlighting that women should be silent in congregations, prompted Protestants to deny women ordination. What makes Phiri’s (2012:257) approach even more interesting is that she also scrutinises the position of *female missionaries*. The vast majority of denominations considered a “real missionary” only as a (male) ordained person. Women were deemed third-class missionaries, after craftsmen and doctors who formed the second category. Phiri’s (2012:258) conclusion is noteworthy – “the relationship between the women missionaries and African women was basically positive”.

Phiri (2012:258-264) addresses explicitly the question about the ‘agency’ of women in the church and mentions *five issues*. One, *ordination*. Denominations differ and much has changed and been accomplished. Even ordained women still struggle for recognition by fellow male ministers (Phiri 2012:259). Two, *theological education*. There has been a big improvement in this respect, but women still face tough battles as students and as lecturers. Three, *spouses of ministers*. This is a complex phenomenon. For some women, this has opened the opportunity to minister to people; for

⁸ See the excellent biographical account by Hamlen (2021).

⁹ The articles by Ayanga (2016b) and Mwaina (2021) also give good overviews and are worth consulting.

others, the traditional expectations have prevented them from pursuing their own careers (Phiri 2012:262). Four, *Church women organisations*. This is a significant fact for the history of the church in Africa and for a history of women in the church in Africa. This is a success story (Phiri 2012:262). Women have viewed these fellowships as a space for self-expression where they feel they can belong. The work these fellowships do in terms of pastoral support, nurturing of young women, and fundraising is invaluable. Their uniforms, a universal tradition in the various churches, give them a specific status and identity, and a certain amount of power. But again, questionable traditions are found in these fellowships: in most of the churches, a man (usually an elder) must attend the meetings to monitor the discussions. Often, the Bible is interpreted in a conservative way.¹⁰ Five, Phiri (2012:263) refers to women *founding churches*. This often occurs in African independent churches and could be regarded as an ultimate act of self-determination (that is agency!).

Despite the massive tough battles women still face in the church, they remain committed to the church, where they find some meaning and space, although limited, for realising themselves. Phiri (2012:265) also casts her vision to the future and mentions a number of features of a “liberative African indigenous church”. It must be a church where justice is the guiding principle; women must be allowed into leadership positions; the notion of power must be transformed into a servant approach; the content of the theology taught should be empowering to women, and the Trinity should function as a model and basis for relationships (Phiri 2012:266).

1.3 WOMEN IN ZAMBIA – A COMPLEX AND DYNAMIC STORY

1.3.1 Profile by recent studies

Considerable research is available on the position of women, especially by historians, political scientists, and anthropologists. In this section, attention is paid to *three recent and very important studies* by the World Bank Group (2023), Peša (2023), and Nsana (2020). The aim is to show the need for considering the agency of women in Zambia.

The study by the World Bank Group (WBG) is what they call specifically a “Zambia gender assessment”. The WBG (2023:10, 13) talks explicitly about the fact that women are “disadvantaged” and that there is “low agency”. The study identified four key areas, or gender drivers, to describe the position of women. These drivers are also interrelated. In the report, the proof they give in the form

¹⁰ Longwe’s (2016) article provides more detail, but her emphases are basically in line with the position of Phiri. These women fellowships are forms of self-expression and “spaces for spiritual development” (Longwe 2016:952).

of statistics is helpful. As the report is relevant, their format in the executive summary will be used (WBG 2023:10-14).¹¹

Gender Gap Driver 1: Human endowment

- Women and girls have low *literacy levels* and enrolments at *secondary schools* are low. For example – 66% of women are literate compared to 82% of men.
- The *fertility rate*, teenage pregnancy, and child marriage are high. For example, the fertility rate is 4.7 children per women.
- The *maternal mortality* rate remains high – 252 death per 100,000 births.
- Women have a high *disease rate*. The prevalence for HIV/AIDS in women is 14.2%, and in men, 7.5%.
- The lack of *water, sanitation, and hygiene* affect women more than men.

Gender Gap Driver 2: Economy

- *Poverty* levels for women (56%) are higher than for men (53%).
- Female labour force *participation* remains low – 27% for women and 43% for men.
- *Commerce, trade*, and industry participation for women (7%) is low compared to 92% for men.
- Women have poor access and control over *land and productive forces* – 35% of women and 64% of men work in agriculture and fisheries.
- Access to *social security* and insurance is much lower than that of men – 35% of women and 60% of men have some form of pension.

Gender Gap Driver 3: Ownership and control over assets

- *House ownership* remains low for women (8%) compared to 17% for men. Women suffer high instances of “property grabbing” as widows.
- Women (56%) have lower access to and inclusion in *financial services* than men (62%).

Gender Gap Driver 4: Gender-based violence and agency

- Participation in *decision-making positions* remains low. In 2021, women accounted for only 15% of the members in the National Parliament.
- There is a high prevalence of *gender-based violence*. Women (47%) experience some form of violence (physical, sexual or emotional) by their husband or partner. There is a high acceptance and tolerance of wife-beating in the society.

¹¹ Only some of the statistical figures are included to demonstrate the point.

This study is crucial, as it gives a *factual picture* of the disadvantaged situation of women.

Peša's (2023) study has a different approach. She writes as a historian and is interested in the historical shifts in women's position in Zambia, and in a carefully qualified description of agency. Her work is in line with the discussion about agency in the *Introduction* to this research. Peša (2023:1) views the history of women in Zambia as "dynamic, complex and varied". Peša's study is important because she writes as an academic and is interested in how scholarship on women in Zambia has changed over the years.

Two insights in the scholarship can be highlighted (see Peša 2023:2, 9). First, there is a general shift from relative gender equity in the precolonial period to one of subordination and marginalisation in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Secondly, older scholarship viewed women in terms of underdevelopment and double exploitation (economy and culture), whereas more recent studies emphasise that "women have had agency, even in unfavorable conditions" (Peša 2023:2).

Peša (2023:2-9) discusses these two perspectives in terms of agriculture and rural location, urbanism, ritual and religion, as well as political authority. These are briefly summarised next.

In the precolonial era, rural agriculture was gendered; men and women had distinct but complementary tasks. Colonial rule disrupted this situation (Peša 2023:3). They assigned commercial agriculture to men and subsistence production to women. Men acquired control over technology, seeds, fertilizer, and markets. This made women "dependent on men to an unprecedented degree" (Peša 2023:3). The colonial masters and the Christian missionaries imposed the ideology of patriarchy and the idea of a nuclear family on the people (Peša 2023:2). This affected the power women had in terms of matriliney, separating the domestic from the public. "The increased prominence of Christianity since the end of the 19th century changed understandings of female roles and gender profoundly" (Peša 2023:7).

With the development of mining, especially in the Copperbelt, urban centres initially acquired a peculiar character. Accommodation was for single migrant men. This placed restrictions on the freedom of movement for women as they could get housing only in a "mine marriage" (Peša 2023:5). Men were regarded as breadwinners and women as housewives. Interesting shifts occurred over time. During the economic crisis (1970s to 1990s), increasingly more men lost their jobs and became dependent on their wives. More recently, women are working in the mines. This has eroded gender stereotypes and associations of women as victims.

Traditionally, women had power over girls' initiation, which gave them control over social reproduction, and even male labour.¹² Over the years, the practice of initiation has changed and the role of men is increasingly present. Recently, the growth of Pentecostalism has also affected women. There is often a strict patriarchy in these churches.

In terms of political authority, women in precolonial times often held high positions, for example as chiefs. The colonial era favoured men as leaders. With independence, the position of women started to change, especially with the establishment of the Women's League (1964). Slowly, women entered Parliament.

In these four areas, Peša emphasises the *agency of women*, despite the overwhelming odds against them. For example, with the development of mining and the migration of men to the cities, women developed entrepreneurial skills, in order to survive at home. In the colonial period, women showed resistance by, for example, marches and civil disobedience. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, women often became household heads and managed to survive. Small-scale economic activities such as brewing and selling second-hand clothing are evidence of women's agency. Women were marginalised and subordinated in the colonial era and in missionary Christianity, but they have navigated difficult conditions to assert their agency and power.

A third article that is relevant for this research is the one by *Nsana* (2020), a lecturer at the University of Zambia. She is interested in whether feminism has had a positive or negative impact on the lives of women in Zambia. The question is whether the feminist movement has accelerated the achievement of gender equality. Like Peša, Nsana's (2020:1) answer is in a sense that the position of women is ambiguous and complex – "After a long time of suffering and discrimination, women have found limited recognition in society." Nsana (2020:2) does not work with the notion of agency, but she speaks about women "to become fully self-actualised beings". There have been some positive impacts (Nsana 2020:7) such as a proliferation of women's movements; an increase in the enrolment rate for girls; a significant change in political opportunities with women's representation of roughly a fifth in Parliament (2019); a slow growth in the employment rate for women, and violence against women has at least "moved from the shadows to the foreground" (Nsana 2020:8). The negative impact basically concerns perception, that is, that feminism is anti-male. Like Peša, Nsana (2020:9) also mentions the surprising effect of the West: "The diffusion of Western culture in Zambia since colonialism has widened the scope of male dominance beyond the family." Her research emphasises the importance of women's movements and their positive impact on the lives of women.

¹² Initially, in the precolonial era, a man had to work for his mother-in-law for up to eight years.

These three important and relevant studies by the World Bank Group, Peša, and Nsana reveal *three aspects*: Statistics still show how disadvantaged women are; some progress has been made towards equal relations and the liberation of women; even under very difficult conditions, women have manifested glimpses of their agency.

1.3.2 Women and the church

This section pays attention to women in the church in Zambia, in general, and describes the Women's Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ). As this study focuses on African women and spirituality, I will not provide detailed overviews of the church situation in Zambia and of the RCZ. Excellent material is available for these themes such as, for example, Sakupapa's (2016) article on Christianity in Zambia, which also includes a table of statistical data, and Verstraelen-Gilhuis' (1982) seminal study on the history of the RCZ.

The Gender Desk of the Council of Churches in Zambia did a *gender audit* in 2008 (referencing CCZ 2008), with the aim of establishing to what extent policies and practices by member churches either constrain or promote gender justice. Seventeen churches were assessed in the study. Five of the *major findings* include (CCZ 2008:5-7):

- Male-dominated *leadership* in the churches. Interestingly, titles often hide discrimination. Women would be called "Reverend", but not allowed to be a pastor in the church.
- There are many *reasons* for the unequal participation of men and women. There could be resistance to change, lack of confidence in women, and women themselves could be hesitant to study theology for fear that they would not find someone to marry.
- *Culture* in various forms plays a major role in the position of women. Cultural traditions were transferred from society to the church and perpetuate the domestic association with women's roles; furthermore, the culture of the churches' origin (that is, in which province the church was founded) carried on the cultures of the denominations themselves.
- There is a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion in the churches with regard to the *notion of gender*, and the distinction between sex and gender.
- Interestingly, women could exercise their gifts without restriction in *Women's Fellowships*.

In this section, attention is paid to the *Women's Fellowship* in the *Reformed Church in Zambia* (RCZ), using Phiri's (2017) PhD thesis as the main source, in this instance. The RCZ was established in 1899 when the chief of the Ngoni people in the eastern province of Zambia invited missionaries to his region. The mission work was undertaken by the Dutch Reformed Church of the Orange Free State in South Africa. The offices in the RCZ (deacon, elder, and minister) were exclusively filled by males

for nearly 100 years. The missionaries transferred the patriarchal culture from their country and implemented a conservative interpretation of Scripture with, for example, passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:26-40.

The RCZ took a long time to change their official view regarding women in leadership positions. At the synod of 1989, it was decided to open the office of deacon to women; in 1998, the office of elder included women and, in 2000, women were accepted to become ordained ministers. Despite the opening of the offices to women, the RCZ remains a male-dominated church (Phiri 2017:4).

The establishment of the *Chigwirizano cha azimai*, or the Women's Guild/Fellowship, was the initiative of the wives of missionaries since the mid-1920s (Phiri 2017:70). Formal meetings started to take place from 1935. A missionary's wife, Susie Theron, formally established the *Chigwirizano*, in Chipata. Two aspects are worth mentioning. One day, a week was set aside for a specific meeting of Bible reading, prayer, and mutual encouragement. A uniform for the women was adopted as a sign of identity (black skirt with a white blouse, a black headpiece, and black shoes).

Through various activities, the fellowship fosters a strong spiritual foundation among its members. It promotes a sense of community and togetherness by holding regular prayer meetings and Bible Study sessions. These gatherings provide a safe space for women to gather, share their stories, and draw strength from one another through collective prayer and sacred scripture study. Furthermore, the fellowship encourages its members to live exemplary lives, serving as role models for their families and communities. This includes behaving with integrity, demonstrating moral values, and treating others with kindness and respect, regardless of their social or economic standing.

One of the fellowship members' primary responsibilities is to nurture and care for their families. This includes tending to their husbands' and children's physical and emotional needs, keeping their homes in good condition, and providing for their families. However, this responsibility goes beyond simply providing material necessities; it also includes creating a loving and supportive environment in which Christian values are upheld and practised. Recognising the value of spiritual guidance within the family unit, the fellowship promotes regular family prayers. Members are encouraged to lead their families in devotional activities, fostering a spirit of faith and unity in their homes.

In addition, the fellowship promotes a sense of compassion and service to those in need. Members are encouraged to actively participate in charitable work, and to assist the less fortunate members of their communities through a variety of initiatives such as financial assistance, the distribution of essential supplies, and emotional support. Finally, the fellowship encourages active participation in the weekly Sunday worship service. Attending these services not only strengthens the personal

relationship with God, but also reinforces the sense of belonging to a larger spiritual community, contributing to a common purpose and collective growth. The fellowship wants to support the women members' moral, spiritual, and social development through these activities, enabling them to live happy, purposeful lives based on their faith, community service, and dedication to improving their families and surroundings.

Although the Chigwirizano functions as an "alternative" ministry, it is still subject to the constitution of the church, *the Zolamulila*, and falls under the supervision of presbyteries and the synod.

1.4 CONCLUSION – UNREALISED AGENCY

This chapter described *many narratives* about women; narratives of traditional culture, colonialism, and the missionary movement, as well as studies by large international organisations and scholars. The chapter also included stories of countries and churches. Ultimately, the chapter conveyed the story of women and their agency amidst major opposing forces.

The complex role and contradictory impact of *traditional cultures*, of *colonialism*, and of the Western *missionary movement* stand out strongly and form part of the "narrative self" of African Christian women. Future studies would have to refer to the impact of traditional culture and to the missionary movement in quite *nuanced and qualified* manner. This is clear from the studies cited in this chapter.

The *gender gap* between men and women is undeniably real and confirmed by annual statistics issued by respectable international organisations. This differs from country to country and from church to church. This bleak picture is aggravated by the perpetuation of patriarchal stereotypes and attitudes.

Despite the depressing profile, a slow change and improvement, and the emergence of a *new sensibility* towards women should also be mentioned. There is a slow but steady journey towards recognition of women's full personhood.

Against this background, it is *justified* to continue focusing on the *agency* of women, to reclaim, to nurture, and to enhance it.

Women should *not* be viewed primarily as *victims*, but as *agents* who have been asserting themselves, determining themselves against all odds.

Women Fellowships in churches remain an intriguing phenomenon; they are spaces of success and agency.

All the narratives and scholarly studies display the faith and commitment of African women. Their *spirituality* is worth admiring and studying.

CHAPTER 2. PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

As this study focuses on spirituality, *various aspects* of this phenomenon and field of study need to be clarified. The issues addressed under the various headings capture some of the *main dimensions*. A specific attempt is made to listen to the position by outstanding scholars such as Kourie, Schneiders, Waaijman, and Sheldrake,¹³ who, in a sense, established the discipline.

2.1 TURN TO SPIRITUALITY

There are a *number of reasons* why people are turning to spirituality. The *transition* from a monocultural, Eurocentric church to a *multicultural, global church* is one factor contributing to the turn toward spirituality. Christianity can now embrace the spiritual expressions of other cultures and break free from Western thought thanks to this paradigm shift. This change is not unique to Christianity; it is also evident in other religions.¹⁴ It facilitates the emergence of a diversity of spiritual wisdom, energy, and cultural forms, by encouraging a global consciousness and a move towards unity. In addition, this change promotes spiritual sharing and respect, displacing attitudes of dominance, isolation, and hostility with those of communication and understanding. “Former attitudes of isolation, hostility, domination and colonialism are giving way to respect and spiritual sharing — leading to ‘dialogic dialogue’” (Kourie 2006:27). Conversation has the potential to contribute to the growth of our spiritual journey. It enables us to critically consider, inquire about, and investigate our experiences, convictions, and comprehension of the transcendent or Divine. Our preconceptions can be challenged, our new perspectives can be developed, and our spiritual understanding can be strengthened by discussing and exchanging opposing points of view. Kourie (2006:27) is of the opinion that “[r]espect for the autonomy of the diverse traditions leads to mutual enrichment. This is particularly important now that diverse spiritualities are becoming increasingly appreciated among diverse traditions”.

The second reason is *discontent with traditional religious institutions*. Many people may have lost faith in organised religion and its inflexible rules. They opine that traditional religious organisations are too impersonal or overly dogmatic. According to Kourie (2006:27), “[t]he dissatisfaction with the mainline churches has in certain cases resulted in a move to more conservative communities. This is due to a desire for deeper spiritual meaning, together with the belief that churches are too involved with internal organisational issues and not sufficiently concerned with spiritual matters”. As a result,

¹³ Detail to be given when the referencing takes place.

¹⁴ For change in Jewish spirituality, see Green (1987), esp. part 2. For Islam, see Al-Azmeh (2009).

the relationship between spirituality and religion has recently been clarified and given rise to spirituality as a discipline.¹⁵

The third reason contributing to the transition towards spirituality is the significant influence of *postmodernism*. We have started to doubt modernity's capacity to deliver the awaited answers and solutions, as its flaws and limitations became more apparent. Postmodernism offers a fresh viewpoint that stresses the subjectivity and relativity of knowledge and reality, challenging the conventional ideas of truth, reason, and progress. This intellectual movement shapes our understanding and interpretation of the modern world and has an impact on a number of disciplines, including philosophy, architecture, art, and literature. Since postmodernism is still influencing our intellectual, social, and cultural landscape, its influence cannot be understated. "There is a loss of faith in secularisation with its marginalisation of religion. There is also a sense of horror at the daily misery of millions of people, who live in a world of hunger, violence and ethnic hatred. Clearly, the values and ideals bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment are deficient. Modernity can no longer be seen as the panacea for the future" (Kourie 2006:29). It can be said that, through deconstruction, postmodernism questions the conventional binary oppositions and hierarchies. It challenges the rigid definitions and classifications imposed by prevailing ideologies. "Postmodernism can be described as deconstructive, eliminative or constructive and revisionary" (Kourie 2006:30). It aims to reveal the fractured and contingent nature of reality, by dismantling grand narratives and metanarratives. Postmodernism seeks to dismantle and subvert prevailing discourses through deconstruction, creating room for dissenting viewpoints and marginalised voices.

What Kourie has identified could also be applied to the *context of Africa*. There is an immense growth of institutional churches, but at the same time there is a need by believers to experience faith. It would be correct to refer to a "turn to spirituality" in Africa. Chapter 4 points to a proliferation of academic attempts to map the phenomenon of spirituality in Africa.

2.2 DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality's definition or meaning is a *complex idea* that has changed over time. Defining something that includes a wide range of activities, beliefs, and practices is indeed a challenging task. According to Kourie (2006:22), spirituality "is an umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre. Its popular usage covers all sorts of beliefs and values, and its usage is often imprecise". It is challenging to provide a clear and succinct definition of spirituality, due to the variety of perspectives, interpretations, and cultural developments.

¹⁵ The distinction and relation will be discussed later in this chapter in the fourth sub-heading.

Spirituality has often been misinterpreted to imply piety. However, It is important to view spirituality within a broader context. Whether persons are religious or not, spirituality refers to the *fundamental principles that provide meaning to our lives*. The fundamental principles of life are the guiding forces that shape our existence. These principles serve as the building blocks upon which all aspects of life are formed and sustained. “It refers therefore to the ‘ultimate values’ that give meaning to our lives, whether or not they are religious or non-religious” (Kourie 2006:22). This means that *everyone has a spirituality*. What makes Christian spirituality distinctive, will be discussed later in the chapter.

Sometimes, spirituality is viewed in terms of power, success, money, pleasure, or a way of life focused on a higher reality beyond selfish desires. The goal of spirituality is to foster the spiritual aspect of human existence through a variety of practices, beliefs, and experiences. This can entail the pursuit of inner transformation, prayer, meditation, introspection, and ethical living. Yet it can be argued that spirituality does not only entail inner transformation but also the *external dimensions of life*. “The concept of self-transcendence is of vital importance in all forms of spirituality and its implementation in daily life.” (Kourie 2006:24). This notion of *self-transcendence* is crucial to grasp the phenomenon of spirituality.

Recently, spirituality as *a field of study* has gained interest. A number of courses and programmes are introduced at tertiary level, universities, and even academic societies. The discipline of spirituality seeks to investigate the actual human *experience of God*. This occurs in an interdisciplinary manner that is *descriptive* rather than prescriptive. It operates with an open mind. A phenomenological approach with expository, analytic, and synthetic elements is required. “A phenomenological, rather than a confessional approach to the academic study of spirituality effects an open mind, whereby different spiritualities may be examined non-judgemental” (Kourie 2006:33). The main goal in the study of spirituality is research oriented. The focus is cognitive rather than formative.

In an older but well-known study, Principe (1983:129, 135) refers to the “fluidity” in the use of the term and distinguishes three levels of ‘spirituality’, namely the existential level, the formulation of a teaching about a lived reality, and a scholarly study. Principe’s (1983:139) definition emphasises that spirituality is about “a person living a faith or commitment” and this “concerns his or her striving to attain the highest ideal or goal”.

In a very important article, Schneiders (1989:678) concurs with Principe. For her, spirituality refers to “(1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualizes that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience”. According to Schneiders

(1989:684), spirituality is the “experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms of ... self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives”. Three aspects are crucial in this instance, namely *experience*, *ultimate value*, and *integration*. These aspects are used in this study as critical markers with reference to spirituality.

Sheldrake (2016:20), a well-known contemporary scholar of spirituality, identifies the *key emphases* in the various definitions of spirituality: a holistic and integrated approach to life, a quest for the sacred, a sense of goal or purpose, the presence of some form of development, an appreciation of some form of virtue, and the presence of some self-reflexivity.

As a result of this interest, an advance in the field of information and communication technology, a new community is born. Under the auspices of the Titus Brandsma Institute, an academic forum consisting of professionals in the field of spirituality, exchange information. This Institute also provides a digital learning platform.¹⁶

2.3 ELEMENTS OF SPIRITUALITY

After reflecting on all its forms, spirituality comes down to *three elements*, according to Waaijman (2006:13-14). Spirituality is a *relational process* between God and man; it is a *gradual process*, and it is about *transformation*. This simple way of thinking about spirituality is helpful when studying the phenomenon.

A *relationship* between God and people is central to all spiritual traditions. This dynamic relationship incorporates aspects of both divinity and humanity. The divine pole should be experienced and engaged with at various stages of the spiritual journey, rather than being merely named or defined.

A key component of spirituality is the *alteration* of human existence. Our intellect, will, memory, ability to control our drives, lifestyle, perception of time and space, social interaction, religious life, and culture are a few areas in our life that undergo this metamorphosis. This implies becoming more connected to the Divine and distancing ourselves from externalities and prevailing patterns.

Spirituality is a *multifaceted* phenomenon, consisting of several complementary elements. It includes psychological, sociocultural, and experiential aspects. To develop a deeper spiritual life entails *integrating* psychological elements, sociocultural influences, and personal experience.

¹⁶ See <https://www.ru.nl/titusbrandsmainstitute>

2.4 SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

There are many facets to, and a *complex interaction* between organised religion and spirituality. Our unique experience of connecting with the transcendent or Divine is referred to as spirituality, whereas organised religion describes the rituals, doctrines, and hierarchies of a particular religious tradition. Organised religion often provides a framework and structure for us to explore and express our spirituality. It offers rituals, teachings, and community support that can help us enhance our spiritual experiences and connect with others who share similar beliefs and values. Organised religion can provide a sense of belonging, guidance, and moral framework for those seeking spiritual fulfilment.

However, spirituality is *not limited* to the framework of organised religion. Many people describe ourselves as spiritual but not religious. This implies that we have a personal relationship with the transcendent or Divine but do not follow any particular religious tradition or engage in formal religious activities. Kourie (2006:24) mentions that spirituality comprises relationships with things, nature, other people, and the Ultimate, as well as true morality and integration, rather than being understood in terms of religious practices. It is important to recognise that there are situations in which spirituality and religion are not incompatible. The essential elements of spirituality can still thrive, even in the face of religion's occasional rigidity and inflexibility. "Viewing spirituality and religion as partners and not as rivals enables the former to vitalise the latter; at the same time religion provides a locus which prevents spirituality from becoming rootless and isolated" (Kourie 2006:26).

There is a distinction between spirituality and religion. Kourie (2006:24) believes that "[i]t is possible to practice a deep spirituality without necessarily being religious in the accepted understanding of the word". These arguments arise due to the fact that spirituality is viewed as dealing with *qualities of the human spirit*. It is *personal, inward, and experiential*. It speaks of love, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, and compassion, whereas religion deals with faith. It has connotations of institution, ritual, articulation of doctrine, prayer, salvation, and so on. Another approach views spirituality and religion as partners. Religion gives life to spirituality. It is safe to say that religion is the optimal context for spirituality.

One note should be added here about Christianity in Africa that will become clear in the following chapters. African Christian spirituality is intimately entangled with the church, especially with women fellowship organisations. The distinction between spirituality and institutionalised religion

is not that great as in a secularized West. African Christian spirituality is basically a church phenomenon.

2.5 SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY

An important issue is the relationship between spirituality and theology, and specifically systematic theology. It is clear from the literature that a shift has occurred in this instance. Up to the mid-twentieth century, spirituality was subordinate to dogmatic theology and considered a subdivision of moral theology (Schneiders 1986:263). “Spiritual theology” developed into spirituality as an academic discipline on its own. Spirituality is no longer considered to be “the application to concrete life of principles derived from theology” (Schneiders 1986:264). The focus was no longer on “perfection”, but on growth. The concern is not only with the interior life, but also with all aspects of life, including society, politics, and the body. The emphasis was on experience and on self-transcendence towards the ultimate value we perceive (Schneiders 1986:266). The relationship with theology shifted drastically. Endean (2005:75) refers to some “disjunction” that took place between doctrine and spirituality. Schneiders (1986:270) opines that theology no longer generates spirituality; it is, in fact, the opposite: spirituality generates theology. Theology becomes “a servant” of spirituality and is no longer its master – “theology arises from and is oriented towards that lived experience” (Schneiders 1986:272).

Nowadays, it is widely accepted that spirituality must not be subordinated to theology. At the same time, Endean (2005:77) indicates that there is a kind of “organic connection”. Endean (2005:76) emphasises that “[w]e need an account of theology as normative for spirituality in a way that keeps it open to the unconventional and unpredictable”. Perhaps we should think in terms of a dialectic – a mutual conversation and influence. A specific religious experience may guide us to a specific reading of the Christian tradition (for example, of Christology), and simultaneously the vision of the Christian faith (for example the Trinity) may open new forms of experience. In a most recent study Prevot (2024:423, 430) talks about “different spirituality-theology constellations” and about “the story of an original union, a modern separation, and an emerging reunification”. Theology and spirituality belong intimately together. More on this later in the discussion about the experience of African women and the role of constructive African theology.

2.6 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

As mentioned earlier, experiencing spirituality is a daily occurrence. In discussing spirituality broadly, *three aspects* emerge. First, the study of spirituality examines the *actual practice* of Christianity. According to Schneiders (2005:16), “[i]t is an ongoing project, not merely a collection of experiences

or episodes". Such lived experience is also called "one's spiritual life". Secondly, it is critical to understand that spirituality *transcends* and is not confined to *the individual*. It has the capacity to significantly alter our perception and understanding of our immediate surroundings. Embracing spirituality enhances our understanding of the interdependence and connectivity of all living things and the natural world. This increased awareness, which also promotes a sense of duty and care for the planet, leads to a more peaceful and caring relationship with the environment. In shedding more light on this, Schneiders (2005:17) talks about "the full personhood of all humans, world peace, enlightenment, or the good of cosmos". Thirdly, when considering spirituality in general, it brings us *maturity*. The central idea is about journeying towards growth.

According to Christian spirituality, the *triune God*, who is revealed in Jesus Christ and about whom the Bible provides testimony through the agency of the Holy Spirit, is the *ultimate value*. Secondly, it is important to remember that the focus of Christian spirituality is the *human being in his/her entirety*. "Today we recognise that the subject of Christian spirituality is the human being as whole: spirit, mind and body; individual and social; culturally conditioned and ecologically intertwined with all creation; economically and politically responsible" (Schneiders 2005:17).

As mentioned earlier, the study of spirituality focuses on the Christian faith, which is recognised as a *lived experience*. It is difficult to define an experience. According to Schneiders (2005:17), "[w]e might begin by saying that to experience is to be 'subjectively aware' and that experience is always 'experience of'". In this instance, experience is primarily subjective and, as an existential phenomenon, can only be expressed through written language. Experiences can be behavioural, artistic, literary, or verbal. There is an object in the experience; there is *something that needs to be expressed* and comprehended. It is always "experience of". According to Schneiders (2005:18), spirituality studies "individuals" who may be specific persons such as Mother Teresa, or specific movements such as Benedictine monasticism, or themes such as "the world", or practices such as "centring prayer, spiritual direction or religious pacifism". Spirituality studies the experiences of the spiritual life.

There are *three methods* for studying spirituality in academia, namely anthropological, theological, and historical. In the vast majority of research projects, all three approaches interact constantly.

The *historical approach* is a methodology that attempts to comprehend history instead of creating a narrative about it. Spiritual historians were interested in elucidating the 'how' of events as well as why they occurred in a particular way. "Historians tended to see this diachronic analysis of 'the past' as generic and the generic as sufficient explanation, at least on the human level, of whatever took

place in space and time” (Schneiders 2005:20). This started in major cities such as Rome and Paris. A shift occurred in the postmodernist era and had a significant impact on historians. Historians themselves have questioned the fundamental tenets of the historical critical method: that something genuinely “really happened” and could exist in the past in a free-standing manner that could be accessed through appropriate means; that the “real story” could be discovered and recounted by an impartial scholar who played no part in the narrative that would be biased; “that something like the ‘whole story’ could be told, and that causes could be identified which could only have produced what in fact happened and so on” (Schneiders 2005:20). The historical approach to Christianity attempts to understand the phenomenon of the lived experience of faith.

From the seventeenth century onwards, various groups have interpreted *theological spirituality* differently. For example, Catholics viewed theological spirituality as the theoretical study of “the life of perfection” that was divided into three stages: mystical union (the path of perfection), illumination (the way of the proficient), and purification (the way of beginners). It mostly referred to the private lives of people such as mystics, nuns, and monks. The “active life” and the “passive life”, wherein the activity of the Holy Spirit takes the place of the human subject, are two divisions of spiritual theology. The theological subdiscipline came under attack in the mid-twentieth century, particularly with reference to the three stages of spiritual life. The major theological objections were that the approach was elitist and divisive and seemed to deny the universal call of the baptised to the fullness of spiritual life; it subverted the unity of spiritual life and restricted the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual life (Schneiders 2005:23). Its weakness was the overemphasis on the “interior life”. There were questions about what made spirituality unique. In this instance, Christian spirituality’s unique attribute was noted in its foundation in the Christian faith. The relationship between Christian spirituality and the creed, moral code, and the cult of church tradition make it uniquely Christian. For this reason, theological spirituality strongly emphasises our holistic nature and our experience rather than simply the “interior life”. Every approach has its challenges. In this instance, the challenge for those who use this approach is to bear in mind that Christian spirituality is more than simply theological expression.

The *anthropological method* is a more recent creation that emerged from postmodernity. This approach to Christian spirituality tends to emphasise a *hermeneutical approach*, which has two goals, namely to understand and to explain. It is particularly concerned with aspects of spirituality that are not accessible to disciplines other than theology. The study is covered in the first section, and the development of subjectivity within the self is covered in the second section. “The researcher is not so much learning what to do or how to do it better or how to help others in the spiritual life.

She or he is becoming a spiritually richer and deeper person” (Schneiders 2005:27). The more varied realities have prompted the development of this strategy. This new approach’s postmodern sensibilities have other characteristics. “It is wary of metanarratives, substantialism and absolutisms of all kinds, even those emerging from heretofore unquestioned theological premises” (Schneiders 2005:27). The *interpretation of the Christian religious experience* is its *main concern*. It discusses the phenomenon in terms of the researcher’s interests in religious experience, which may not be based on theology or history.

We also find what Schneiders has identified in the work by other scholars such as, for example, Downey (1997:123-128). Downey (1997:129) adds a fourth method – the “appropriative”. This describes, critically analyses, and interprets a spiritual life constructively. Downey (1997:131) regards this as “perhaps best suited to the study of Christian spirituality”. This is helpful, as it comes across as fairly simple.

Two more perspectives may be added. In an older study, Kinerk (1981:5) states an insight: Spirituality should be limited to what is *expressed* – “Spirituality studies expressions.” This is constructive when we think about spirituality. In his study of the spirituality of Black Hebrew Pentecostals, Sherron (2010) gives this concrete direction. In his study, which also entailed empirical work, Sherron (2010:14-21) examined and described *six forms* of such *expressions*: the context where the spirituality is found; specific concrete practices; sources of authority and normativity; theological themes present; understandings of morality or ethics, and notions of transformation. This provides a concrete and manageable map to navigate the study of a concrete form of spirituality of women in Africa. For example the following questions arise:

- How is their situation? What are their experiences?
- What specifically do they do as spiritual acts?
- What is for them the final source they obey?
- How do they view and describe God, for example?
- What is wrong or bad for them, and what do they regard as good?
- What do they aspire to?

2.7 VARIOUS FORMS OF SPIRITUALITY

2.7.1 Waaijman on major forms

Waaijman (2006:5-12) distinguishes *three major forms* of spirituality, namely established schools, primordial spiritualities, and counter-movements.

Spiritual schools, sometimes referred to as established systems or traditions of spiritual practice, are a broad category of institutions and groups whose mission is to support people's spiritual development. These educational institutions offer a methodical structure that enables people to explore their spirituality. The Society of Jesus, also referred to as the Jesuits, is one such example of a spiritual school. The Jesuits, established in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius of Loyola, have had a considerable influence on the spiritual landscape. As essential elements of their spiritual practice, the Jesuits strongly emphasise education, intellectual rigour, and a dedication to social justice. Another illustration of a spiritual school are the Vincentians, who are the adherents of Vincent de Paul. The community's mission, guided by the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul, serve the underprivileged and the disenfranchised. All of these spiritualities adhere to a specific framework.

In spirituality, the *source experience* is extremely important. It refers to the basic perception of being touched by God, which affects and changes people in their unique circumstances. Building upon this primary experience, a school of spirituality was developed and serves as the foundation for a spiritual path and influences the distinct viewpoint and methodology of that particular school. In this form of spirituality, the *circle of pupils* is important because they are vital to the formation and dissemination of a school of spirituality. A school of spirituality needs students who live out and embody that experience in their own lives, in addition to being founded on a founding experience, or an experience of the source. These students become the teachers and practitioners of the spiritual teachings and practices, forming an inner circle around the founder. They follow their teacher's example and use the same methods to purify themselves, combining useful advice into a logical whole. By ensuring the spiritual tradition's continuation and spread, the circle of pupils enables more people to partake in the source experience and gain from its transformational power.

In spirituality, the orientation toward *particular values and the value system* is important. Spiritual schools are defined by particular values and objectives that they tailor their methods to meet. These institutions serve as hospitals, schools, or places of higher learning. The school of spirituality's identity and mission are shaped in part by its orientation toward particular values. It directs the members of the spiritual community's behaviours and rituals. These objectives and values serve as more than merely doctrines; they also serve to introduce students to the school's conceptual framework and values system. By establishing an interrelated system, the *integration of diverse components* helps spirituality function as a coherent whole. It is believed that spirituality is a multifaceted entity made up of complementary and related components. By combining these components, spirituality is guaranteed to be a coherent and comprehensive system rather than a disconnected one. Every component helps our overall spiritual journey development and progress.

Lay spirituality, indigenous spirituality, and spirituality in secular settings are a few instances of *primordial spirituality*. The phrase 'lay spirituality' describes the commonplace spirituality that emerges within a small family environment. Indigenous spiritualities are those that have not yet been influenced by a prevailing religion. In secular contexts, these spiritualities refer to expressions of spirituality that have broken free from the dominance of religion.

Lay spirituality is a significant form that has contributed to Christian spirituality. There is hardly any evidence of lay spirituality that was heavily influenced by oral tradition. One such spirituality dates back to the Old Testament, where the patriarchal tales serve as the community's sustaining structure within the framework of the family. In the relationship to God, in which God is called "My mighty one", God is viewed as the one who shapes their everyday life. This kind of spirituality continued to play a pivotal role, even in the time of the exile. Its family structure remained intact. The rules continued to govern the family.

Many movements and forms of expression that question dominant power structures and social norms are included in the broad category of *counter-spirituality*. This is an anti-establishment, transformative force that aims to destroy the existing *status quo* and provide new perspectives on spirituality. These counter-spiritual movements frequently arise in reaction to the prevailing cultural narratives that stifle personal expression and freedom of religion or the restrictive nature of traditional religious institutions. Counter-spirituality creates new avenues for spiritual liberation, social change, and personal development, by challenging and criticising the *status quo*. According to Waaijman (2006:10), "counter-movements in spirituality are found outside the sphere of power structures and established relations: outside of their concepts, their spatial orders, their time period, their hierarchies, their great narratives". Examples of such movements are prophets such as Elijah, Micah, and Jeremiah, who spoke against kings who violated the rights of the people. A counter-movement out of the wilderness could be linked to the establishment of Israel as a nation; stateless people, oppressed farmers, and shepherds rebelled against Egypt's hegemony in the Middle East. This kind of spirituality finds its way in the field of tension called "structure-anti-structure". There are *three forms* of anti-structure:

According to Waaijman (2006:11), *liminality* "is marked by continual alternation between death and life". These entities experience the extreme of life, from being valued to being devalued. Being liminal means existing outside of the social structure and is defined by a sense of "nowhereness" and indeterminacy. People go through death, darkness, and nothingness during this phase, but they also encounter vital energy, creativity, community, equality, insight, imagination, wholeness, and naturalness. In contrast to other types of spirituality, liminal spirituality emerges beyond the

confines of established cultural frameworks. It is derived from the experiences of people who are in a state of liminality and are cut off from society. The spirituality of exiles, desert monks, poverty movements, escaped slaves from Egypt, and even those who live in isolation within contemporary mass culture can all be considered examples of this. Examples include the spirituality of slaves who fled Egypt and went into wilderness; the spirituality of the exile; the spirituality of the desert monks; the spirituality of poverty movements; the spirituality of the Jews driven out of Spain and Portugal. This kind of spirituality is developed outside the standard cadres of religious or humanistic institutions.

The second form of counter-movement is *inferior spirituality*. The idea of inferior spirituality describes a situation in which people are marginalised in society or at the base of the social pyramid. It is connected to people or categories that are viewed as being at the bottom of the social scale, such as the misfit, the unemployed, the unskilled labourer, the poor, the court jester, the child, or the woman in a patriarchal society. Destitution and a lack of identity, authority, or status define this position. It can be manifested in spiritual practices that emerge outside of formal institutional or cultural frameworks.

Thirdly, *marginal spirituality*, which has positions marked by a double loyalty, describes the spiritual practices and experiences of people or groups who are marginalised or on the periphery of society. These people or organisations may be part of elite or mainstream social circles, but they also have ties to underprivileged or marginalised areas of society. Double loyalty is a common characteristic of marginalised spirituality, as these people or groups balance their allegiance to marginalised communities with their privileged social standing. On the one hand, they belong to a prestigious group in society and, on the other, they are connected to their origin. As Waaijman (2006:12) puts it, “by their double loyalty they can offer radical criticism of the structures of society from inside”. Marginal spirituality emphasises the wisdom and strength that can come from being on the outside or in a marginalised social situation. It presents alternatives to conventional wisdom and presents new angles on spirituality and society.

One may add to Waaijman’s typology that of *Sheldrake* (2013:15-17), which is in a sense much simpler. After studying the history of spirituality, he identifies *four types*: the ascetical-monastic, the mystical, the active-practical, and the prophetic-critical. Each of these answers the questions of how it takes place (practices), and what its ultimate purpose is. The ascetic model, for example, stresses detachment of material possessions, the mystical contemplative disciplines; the active model stresses everyday life and the finding of God in the midst of daily existence, as well as the prophetic approach commitment to social justice.

These different forms have been discussed at some length. They will, to a certain extent, shed light on African womanist spirituality. This form of spirituality shares features with several of the forms and cannot be neatly compartmentalised. There are overlaps with all three of the Waaijman forms. Most of the time, it is found in conventional missionary denominational churches, but it is also a lay and indigenous spirituality, and as womanist expression, a resistant spirituality. These multiple intersections make it a truly unique form of spirituality. Sheldrake's typology opens interesting perspectives. Towards the end of this research, the question is raised as to what extent African womanist spirituality could be (or at least develop into) a form of the prophetic type.

2.7.2 The trinitarian distinctiveness of Christian spirituality

The core feature of Christian spirituality is the conviction that one can have a direct relationship with *God*, the Creator and Life-sustainer. By faith in Jesus Christ, who is recognized as both God's Son and humanity's Savior, this relationship is established through the Holy Spirit.

Christian spirituality has its roots in the person of *Jesus Christ* and reflects the conviction that one can have a close personal relationship with Jesus, who is both fully divine and fully human. This connection with Christ is based on more than merely following doctrine; it is a life-changing union made possible by His death, resurrection, and ongoing presence. The exclusive emphasis on Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity, as stated in 1 Timothy 2:5, sets Christian spirituality apart from other spiritual traditions. Because of this Christ-centred understanding, Christians believe that spiritual development and salvation are closely related. The distinctive feature of Christian spirituality is its focus on *grace and redemption*, which is based on the crucial events of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. This is based on the fundamental idea that salvation is a gift from God.

The *Holy Spirit* is regarded highly in Christian spirituality as an omnipresent, dynamic personal power that sanctifies, empowers, and leads believers. According to John 16:13, the Holy Spirit is the one who guides Christians into all truth and changes their lives so that they resemble Christ. The Holy Spirit is a real person in Christian spirituality who interacts with believers, prays for them, and gives them the ability to carry out their mission and serve others.

Christian spirituality is consequently *trinitarian*, placing a strong emphasis on the believer's relationship with the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This acknowledges each divine

person's distinct yet interrelated roles in the spiritual life. The relationship dynamics between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit serve as a model for the relationships that Christians are expected to cultivate with God and with each other. With its emphasis on oneness, community, and reciprocal love, Christian spirituality frequently reflects this Trinitarian relationality. While other spiritual traditions may focus on a single deity or impersonal force, Christianity's understanding of God as three persons in one sets it apart.

In addition to this trinitarian thrust one could mention the central role of the *Bible* and *the sacraments* in this spirituality. The Scripture serves as the ultimate source of guidance for faith and practice in Christian spirituality, whereas other spiritualities may draw from a variety of sacred texts, philosophical writings, or personal experiences. This means that reading, interpreting, and applying biblical teachings have a significant impact on the Christian spiritual journey. The sacraments, which are baptism and the Holy Communion, serve as signs and symbols for achieving a closer relationship with God and as visible manifestations of his grace. While other spiritualities might have ceremonies or practices that mark significant occasions, Christian sacraments are thought to communicate God's grace in a special and transforming way. Christian spirituality reflects the conviction that faith is both a *personal journey* with God and a shared experience within the *larger Christian community*. Fundamentally, personal spirituality is defined by each person's distinct relationship with God, which is developed through prayer, Bible meditation, and Holy Spirit-led personal development. Christian spirituality thrives in community, recognizing the church as the body of Christ and emphasizing the importance of fellowship, mutual support, and corporate worship.

In an important article Schneiders (2010:249f) addresses the question about the distinctiveness of Christian spirituality. She refers specifically to the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ; "Christian spirituality ... is exploration of that particular experience in relation to all other experiences". This she maintains in a discipline where "most of us are beyond exclusivist or inclusivist elitist claims for the superiority of the spirituality of one religion to that of other religions".

2.7.3 Calvin on piety

As the researcher is from the Reformed tradition and is a member of the Reformed Church in Zambia, it may be relevant to add a short section on the spirituality of John Calvin, using the excellent source by Beeke (2004).

According to Calvin, *piety* is the fundamental quality of Christian life that forms the basis of all other aspects of faith and practice. This emphasises the significance of genuine devotion. One major idea that comes out of Calvin's writings is the interdependence of *piety and knowledge*; for Calvin, knowing God only intellectually does not suffice. According to Beeke (2004:127), "[f]or Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, are inseparable". To pursue true spirituality requires that knowledge be transformed into a sense of reverence, love, and obedience to God to create a union between the intellect and the heart. Calvin's theological insights not only clarify the importance of piety as the *central idea* of Christian life, but also offer an understanding of how he links this idea to the emphasis of carrying the cross in a way that corresponds with the model set by Christ. By examining Calvin's view on piety, one is able to understand his theological framework as well as how he emphasizes the incorporation of this aspect of faith into *everyday Christian life*. Calvin's lessons on piety go beyond academic discussion to include advice for Christians who want to exhibit piety in their day-to-day interactions and decision-making.

The *foundation* of true piety is a devotion to God, which is based on an understanding of *God's character* and our place as his created beings. We can develop a meaningful spiritual connection that directs our thoughts, deeds, and interpersonal relationships in accordance with God's divine purpose and will, by achieving an understanding of God and our role in his design. Calvin believed that true piety requires a *trinitarian orientation* that clarifies a dynamic relationship with the Triune God. As the ultimate source of all existence, the Father is entwined with the Son, acting as the divine mediator, and cooperating in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit, who acts as the power for spiritual renewal and cultivates a *sense of communion* with God.

The second perspective is that Calvin's piety is deeply *rooted in Scripture*, which he acknowledged as the final and infallible source for knowing God and to guide moral behaviour. The Bible is the best source of knowledge about God's character and can be a trustworthy guide for developing true respect and devotion to him when read with discernment. "The pious man's deepest concern therefore is God himself and the things of God – God's Word, God's authority, God's Gospel, God's truth" (Beeke 2004:127). Piety is about the *glory of God*. The bond that believers experience through their union with Christ is an example of the centrality of Christ, which is at the *heart of devotion*. This relationship, nurtured by faith, is a doorway to re-establish communion with God, and to spark a devotion that leads us to live lives marked by holiness. The process of restoration enables us to rebuild a strong relationship with God and discover the great happiness that comes from belonging to him. This means seeking refuge in Jesus Christ, who pardons us of our sins and provides us with a way to salvation. This is a way to find comfort and redemption.

Calvin considered the *believer's union with Christ* to be the *centre of Christian piety* and spirituality (Beeke 2004:127). Calvin believed that the believer's existence and devotion to God were derived from the mystical union with Christ, which is a central feature of the Gospel. A believer's spiritual life and piety are thought to derive from this close relationship with Christ, which shapes their relationship with God and directs their Christian practice. The fundamental idea of piety directs us to obey and worship God in *all facets of our lives*, including our daily activities, relationships, emotions, and moral decisions, by coordinating our thoughts and deeds with the will of God to show respect and devotion. When a believer is united with Christ, his/her life is transformed by the dual grace of *sanctification* and *justification*: "Justification offers imputed purity, and sanctification, actual purity" (Beeke 2004:130).

It is important to emphasise that the believer's mystical, yet very real, union with Christ is enabled by the connection of faith that is *guided by the Spirit*; this union is not the result of one's own merit or effort. Beeke (2004:129) mentions that "[f]rom God's perspective, the Spirit is the bond between Christ and believers". The work of the Spirit entails spiritual rebirth, illumination, and sanctification. The Holy Spirit generates and upholds genuine spirituality, guiding individuals on their journey of faith with transformative grace, divine wisdom, and the nurturing power of God's love, thus shaping their spiritual growth and strengthening their connection to God. "Similarly, the concepts of *communio* and *participatio* helped shape Calvin's understanding of regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, assurance, election, and the church." (Beeke 2004:39). A Christian's piety has a decisive impact on all aspects of the Christian's life.

The *church* is essential to the development of piety, as it leads and uplifts believers on their spiritual path. Calvin's emphasis on *corporate piety* is obvious by adhering to sound doctrine, the preaching of sermons, the administration of sacraments, the recitation of prayers, and the observance of worship services. These practices help cultivate piety in the lives of believers, and foster a spiritual commitment to living out their faith with sincerity and devotion. "The church is mother, educator, and nourisher of every believer, for the Holy Spirit acts in her. Believers cultivate piety by the Spirit through the church's teaching ministry, progressing from spiritual infancy to adolescence to full manhood in Christ" (Beeke 2004:131). Because they are regularly taught insightful lessons, believers grow and develop spiritually in the supportive environment of the church. It is important to emphasise that being involved in the church and actively participating in its activities not only enriches our spiritual journey, but also provides the support and sense of belonging that is necessary for spiritual development.

Our main objective in being pious is to make sure that we constantly honour and give *glory to God*, acknowledging his presence and authority in everything we do, regardless of how we behave, interact with others, or live moral lives.

This overview of Calvin's view on spirituality, or piety, provides a *number of emphases*: the centrality of spirituality, the trinitarian orientation, the importance of the Bible, the crucial role of union with Christ, the decisive work of the Spirit, the nurturing role of the church, and the value of holiness in everyday life in all its aspects.

In the study of missionary Christianity, the question always arises as to what extent these typical traditional elements are present and reflected, and even to what extent they have been "indigenised". This also applies to the study of African womanist spirituality to be discussed later.

2.8 PRACTICES IN SPIRITUALITY

In his standard work on spirituality, Perrin (2007) provides a good overview of the notion of 'practices' in spirituality. This refers to all the activities "Christians engage in to grow and mature in their relationship to God" (Perrin 2007:267). Perrin (2007:269-276) highlights a number of *features of practices* that are useful to repeat. There is a reciprocal relationship between communities and practices – communities shape practices and practices shape communities; the role of body in practices should be clearly viewed and recognised; they are part of everyday life; there is a great variety that appeals to the "range of selves" (Perrin 2007:271) or aspects of the person. Spiritual practices are "non-utilitarian" (Perrin 2007:272); we can never control their outcome, as they open up new possibilities for us.

Perrin (2007:276-289) mentions and discusses the following: prayer, Bible reading, spiritual direction and pilgrimage, retreat, labyrinth, and so on. In his classic work on the spiritual disciplines, Foster (1998) identifies twelve practices in three groups: inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and study); outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission and service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration).

A focus on spiritual practices is a helpful way to study a specific spirituality such as African womanist spirituality. This research provides an antenna for discerning and identifying these.

2.9 NARRATIVE AND SPIRITUALITY – AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The notion of 'narrative' has not been foreign to spirituality in its long history. The practice of maintaining a spiritual autobiography is well known. This section provides a short overview of this tradition, using the excellent source of Staude (2005).

The idea that writing autobiographies can be a spiritual exercise implies having a dialogue with ourselves. This practice gives insight into *self-reflection* and examines the complex connection between our choices, life journey, and turning points. It is a self-examination that takes place in the here and now while incorporating knowledge and understanding from the past. This contemplative conversation allows us to participate in an ongoing *journey of self-exploration* and self-awareness, in order to establish a stronger bond with feelings and ideas. According to Staude (2005:252), “[a]utobiography is a dialogue of the self with itself in the present about the past for the purpose of self-understanding”. An autobiography can be used as a *transformative tool* for personal growth and self-discovery, because it can open doors and allow readers into the author’s life and experiences. A spiritual autobiography can lead to meaningful realisations and the essence of our identity. This is the aim of self-awareness. “Writing an autobiography takes you on a journey into the roots of your own life that may reveal to you aspects of yourself you didn’t even know existed” (Staude 2005:253). It also acts as a *therapeutic process* to both ourselves and the readers. This personal investigation allows us to integrate previous experiences and resolve unresolved conflicts, thus resulting in significant healing, addressing unresolved issues, and letting go of outdated self-perceptions. This transformative journey promotes a *deeper sense of well-being* and self-acceptance. When exploring autobiography, particularly spiritual autobiography, the focus is primarily on the *inner self*, rather than on external influences from society. This idea emphasises the introspective process of examining our spiritual path and personal convictions. It is important to note that we often find ourselves going into introspection to make sense of our experiences during our daily internal dialogues. This self-examination includes both psychological reflection to explain the dynamics of our thoughts and feelings, and theological reflections to provide spiritual insights.

Staude (2005:250) explains spiritual autobiography as “a history and interpretation of a person’s life written by the person who experienced it, considered in relation to its spiritual foundations”. There is always a *connection between life experience and spiritual beliefs*. By considering these connections, we gain an understanding of ourselves and find a purpose and direction that will help us overcome obstacles. The spiritual part highlights the relationship and connectedness of a person to a transcendent. Participating in particular rites, ceremonies, or going to places of worship can serve as “stepping stones”. These provide times for introspection, fellowship, and development. Crucial life events such as marriage, the birth of a child, and the death of a loved one can also be considered crucial life events that play an important role in our spiritual development.

Staude (2005:254) emphasises that personal lives are not isolated events; rather, they are entwined with the web of *interdependent relationships* in society and culture that are influencing them: “Our

life stories take place within a historical context, in a particular society, in a particular place and time, yet few of us take this into account when we write or tell our life stories.” These shape our lives in either a positive or a negative way. According to Staude (2005:254), “[i]n autobiography, to think with history helps to establish a certain distance from oneself by seeing it as both shaped by the structures and conflicts of society, and as responding creatively to their pressures”. It is impossible to avoid talking about our past; however, using our own *memory* is especially difficult when exploring the past. It can be challenging to accurately recall and bring to life past events, particularly when there are gaps. Memories can occasionally be jumbled and inaccurate depictions of our past experiences. Accepting these flaws enables us to comprehend our past in a more complex way. In this regard, Staude (2005:255) states that “[m]emory provides the initial impetus for history, while history becomes a reinforcement, possibly even a validation of memory”. Historical narratives and memory are usually portrayed as intertwined, similar to “wounded warriors”. They rely on one another for comfort and support as they navigate the complexities of the past and present, by sharing the burden of their experiences. Ignoring the background of history hinders not only an understanding of the larger stories being acted out, but also an understanding of the significant impact historical events have had on the overall plot.

Spiritual autobiography can be *traced back* as far as ancient Egypt, the Hebrew Bible, and Greek philosophy. There has been much discussion about the impact of Augustine’s *Confessions*, as his insights have, over the years, influenced many spiritual autobiographies. Augustine’s reflections have influenced modern writers such as Thomas Merton and C.S. Lewis, as well as other notable people such as Dante and St. Theresa. “Augustine recorded both the most significant moments in his interactions with God, such as his conversion, and the mystical experience he shared with his mother, and the anxiety and guilt he felt about his sinfulness, particularly his addiction to sex.” Staude (2005:257). Augustine’s *Confessions* establish the basic *four-part narrative* which includes a description of life before spiritual awakening; an account of the events leading to an encounter with God; a description of the actual encounter/conversion experience, and a celebration of the new life following this transformative event (Staude 2005:258). The main idea centres around how *God impacts* on people’s lives, leading them on a path towards spiritual growth, helping them comprehend the greater meaning of events, strengthening their faith, encouraging acceptance, and, ultimately, helping them find peace with both themselves and others. It represents the bigger picture of how God is working in people’s lives.

Staude carefully scrutinises *three different methods* in his investigation of autobiography to show the different approaches people take to record their life stories. These techniques include the

guided autobiography, which offers a framework for telling stories; the *intensive journey workbook*, which encourages a deeper look into personal narratives, and the *structured life review*, which provides a methodical way to reflect on significant life events. The main objective of the different methods is to empower people to participate in the life-changing process of writing their own stories, encouraging personal growth, and opening the door to healing.

There are *some benefits* to writing a spiritual autobiography. Staude (2005:260) talks about the concept of 'life review'. There is much benefit in considering the concept of 'life review', which includes self-reflection, belief examination, reintegrating the past, constructing an integrated narrative identity, achieving self-understanding, and providing therapeutic value. "In looking back over our lives we try to pick out the connecting threads, to see themes and patterns of as Henry James put it 'the figure in the carpet'." (Staude 2005:260).

The tradition of writing a spiritual autobiography is a particularly rich practice that clearly *applies* to this study, to some extent. Some of the *motifs* mentioned by Staude can be highlighted: self-awareness, transformation, inner self, link between experience and beliefs, role of memory, various methods, and benefits. This study emphasises a particular situatedness – that is, on women in Africa, on narrative as viewed in contemporary scholarship, and on agency – within a political and gendered framework that *moves beyond* the narrow, although relevant, perspectives of Staude's discussion.

2.10 AGENCY AND SPIRITUALITY – RE-INTERPRETING THE JOURNEY MOTIF

The description of spiritual life as a journey is often found in spirituality.¹⁷ It is an apt way to convey the *dynamic nature* of the Christian experience. Often, this movement is expressed in other associated metaphors such as ascent, steps, degrees, or paths of growth. The Old Testament is filled with the journey motif. Byrne (1993:568) mentions how, in the Psalter, we often find the movements of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. In the New Testament, we also find this theme, for example, Luke's Gospel is Jesus' entire journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The so-called three ways of spiritual life have become well known in history – purgative, illuminative and unitive (Byrne 1993:570). In contemporary times, the growth element has often been re-envisioned with the help of developmental psychology towards greater integration and maturity.

In the context of this study, the question may be raised as to whether the central *notions of transformation and integration*, mentioned earlier in this chapter with reference to Waaijman and Schneiders, could contextually be interpreted in terms of agency. Spirituality would then acquire a

¹⁷ For a good discussion, see Byrne (1993:565-577).

specific contingent and contextual significance. It would indicate what this may imply for the lives of African women. Even the term 'growth' receives a specific direction. This becomes an embrace of agency, of the nurturing of agency, and of the claiming of agency. When searching the electronic data banks on this intersection between spirituality and agency, we find that not a great deal has been written on this. This may be a novel way to examine spirituality. At stake with agency is an inclusive and holistic movement towards the full realisation of women as human beings. In a Christian way, this then acquires a religious-political connotation. Women in the social context of discrimination and various forms of violence fulfil their God-given status.

2.11 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, most of the basic and fundamental issues in the contemporary study of spirituality have been briefly mentioned and discussed as foundation for the remainder of the study. Some of the *insights* can be mentioned succinctly:

- There is a *new interest* in spirituality as opposed to traditional institutionalised religion.
- "Spirituality" can have *various meanings*. It can refer to a lived experience of faith and to the academic study of this phenomenon.
- *Three central notions* form the basis of the contemporary study of spirituality, namely ultimate concern, experience, and integration/fulfilment/transformation.
- It is a difficult undertaking to *study* spirituality. To focus on *expressions* may be a productive approach, whereby to identify specific issues to investigate, or specific questions to attend to.
- There are many and *diverse forms* of spirituality. The forms of marginal or counter-spirituality are particularly relevant, as are types that can be labelled as active or prophetic.
- Despite a non-judgmental attitude in the study of contemporary spirituality, it does not deter one to identify the *distinctiveness* of our own tradition. This has been done in this chapter with reference to Christian, trinitarian and Calvinist spirituality that will also form the frame of reference for the researcher's own narrative in chapter 5.
- In African Christian spirituality the *distinction* between *spirituality and religion* is not so great, especially in light of the role of women fellowship organizations in different churches.
- The notion of '*narrative*' is not foreign to spirituality. It is an old tradition to engage in autobiographical practices.
- To link '*agency*' to spirituality, especially with reference to the journey motif, may be a novel approach.

CHAPTER 3. THE SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN A WIDER CONTEXT

The spirituality of African women is reflected in a multitude of varied and unique stories that represent the distinct experiences and beliefs of different communities. These narratives frequently emphasise African women's tenacity, fortitude, and wisdom, as well as their strong spiritual ties to their ancestors, communities, the natural world, and the Supreme Being. It is critical to recognise that African women's spirituality is not a fixed or homogeneous idea. Over time, it has changed and adapted in response to factors such as colonisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. Fundamentally, for many women throughout the continent, their spirituality continues to be a *source of empowerment, strength, and identity*. It is noteworthy that the spirituality of African women is multifaceted and subject to significant variation. An overview cannot adequately convey the richness and complexity of their spirituality.

This chapter explores the spirituality of African women, by placing it in a wider context of African and feminist spiritualities, in general. Attention is paid to the contribution of the Circle, and especially the important role of Mercy Oduyoye. A final section addresses the phenomenon of African womanist spirituality. The *aim and approach* of the chapter are *to listen* to the voice and contribution of scholars on these various streams of spirituality. An attempt is made to distil major themes or motifs encountered in these states of scholarship. In line with *the focus of this research*, the question is raised as to what extent attention is paid to "narrative" and "agency". The intention is *not to critique* the contributions from a Christian or Reformed perspective. It is about registering scholarly contributions made.

3.1 AFRICAN (CHRISTIAN) SPIRITUALITY IN GENERAL

This section presents the views of three African theologians, namely *Kalilombe*, *Vellem*, and *Nweke*. Each one of them brings unique perspectives to the fore.

Spirituality encompasses various aspects of a culture, including beliefs, practices, and attitudes. When exploring African spirituality, we can gain insight by observing the way of life and understanding the values and traditions upheld by its people. Such a *holistic approach* encompasses not only the spiritual dimension, but also the physical and social dimensions, creating a balance that is ingrained in African societies. According to **Kalilombe** (1994:119), "[f]or Africans, life is a totality; culture is holistic. What one might isolate as the spiritual dimension is embedded in the whole of the people's way of living". From ancestor veneration to the worship of deities and spirits, African

spirituality embraces a vast and diverse range of beliefs and practices that are unique to each community and tribe. Through this deep-rooted spirituality, Africans find a sense of identity, purpose, and interconnectedness with the world around them. “In this sense, spirituality is not restricted to any one religion, but can be found in all religions and cultures” (Kalilombe 1994:115). Whether it is through communal ceremonies, sacred dances, or the recitation of ancient prayers, spirituality permeates every aspect of African life, reinforcing the belief that the spiritual, physical, and social dimensions are intertwined.

What currently *shapes* life in Africa can be viewed from *two perspectives*: the influence of the *past* and the impact of *recent modernisation*. “The underlying contention is that the shape of African spirituality today is a result of the interaction between these two” (Kalilombe 1994:119). The past upholds the rich history, cultural traditions, and diverse ethnicities that continue to shape the daily lives of its people. Modernisation, technological advancements, and globalisation bring about significant changes in various aspects of African society, including education, infrastructure, and economic opportunities.

To continue on this path, it can be argued that the *best place* to explore spirituality is within the heart of *conventional religious traditions*. These customs, including *worship, rituals, and prayers*, provide concrete manifestations of spirituality that are easily comprehensible. Kalilombe (1994:119) points out that “[t]he most obvious place to search for spirituality is in the context of traditional religious practices: in worship, ritual and prayer”. There are also studies on traditional prayers, for example the one by Mbiti (1975). Most of the prayers convey a clear understanding of a *Supreme Being*. A few prayers are directed towards divinities, spirits, the deceased, and the personification of nature. This highlights that Africans have had a distinct belief in a Supreme Deity. Kalilombe (1994:120) emphasises the importance of a specific cosmological order in traditional religion and the relation and *interaction between the visible and the invisible*. “African spirituality is based on the assumption that life is influenced by relationships between human beings and visible and invisible forces. These forces have the potential to bring about positive or negative outcomes. It is crucial to the individuals and the community to have knowledge of the invisible world” (Kalilombe 1994:124).

The *duality of the cosmos* in traditional religion should be clear. There is a constant struggle between good and evil, life and death, love and hatred. According to traditional Africa religion, however, God prevails in all of this. Divinities are viewed as intermediaries between the mortal realm and the divine realm, acting as conduits for communication and blessings. In many cultures, prayers are directed towards these divinities to seek their guidance, protection, and favour. However, there is a deep-rooted *optimism* that God will ultimately prevail. This may explain the remarkable ability of Africans

and communities to endure suffering and pain without succumbing to bitterness (Kalilombe 1994:121).

For traditional Africans, humanity is primarily centred on the *community*. This strong sense of communal identity and interdependence is deeply ingrained in their cultural fabric. In traditional African societies, individuals are not regarded as isolated entities, but rather as integral parts of a larger whole. The community's well-being takes precedence over individual needs and desires. Individuals develop their fundamental sense of identity through their connections with the extended family. The relationship ties people together and creates a bond that cannot be easily broken. "In African spirituality, the value of interdependence through relationships comes high above that of individualism and personal independence" (Kalilombe 1994:122). Being related brings us closer and allows us to support and care for others in times of need. Sharing resources, offering assistance, and providing a helping hand are considered fundamental values. The emphasis on community extends beyond immediate family and kin. It encompasses the entire village or tribe, creating a sense of shared responsibility and collective identity.

Several positive consequences are associated with the institution of kinship and its impact on community solidarity. One such consequence is the practice of *hospitality*, which plays a crucial role in fostering strong bonds within the community. This practice is not limited to members within the group; it is also extended to those outside the group. Kalilombe (1994:122) explains: "Members of the same family or clan exchange hospitality as a matter of course. But it is also extended to outsiders, though here it is first necessary to make sure that the stranger is not an adversary." The act of extending hospitality to outsiders not only promotes cultural exchange and understanding, but also serves as a testament to the generosity and compassion of the community as a whole.

In this community sharing, several additional conditions need to be taken into account. One important condition is that *no* person should *monopolise resources* that could be used by others in times of need. This rule aims to avoid the situation where certain individuals amass wealth, power, or influence, creating a sense of inequality and potential danger to the community as a whole. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on the *rejection of individuals* who refuse to acknowledge their responsibilities and rights of solidarity. Those who display acts of cruelty, quarrelsomeness, lack of forgiveness, or unkindness are met with great aversion. In fact, these individuals are often suspected of practising *witchcraft*, further highlighting the community's commitment to maintaining harmony and cohesion.

Human beings have always regarded *the universe* as a shared heritage. There is a mutual dependence among human beings, animals, vegetation, the elements, the heavenly bodies, the departed, and the visible and invisible entities. This interaction is characterised by a certain level of *respect*.

The use of *medicine* in the African world view is considerably important and serves as a vital component (Kalilombe 1994:125). Within this tradition, medicine not only serves to address physical ailments but also acts as a catalyst in activating the various forces at play. It bestows upon individuals the ability to engage with these forces, whether with benevolent intentions or for more malevolent purposes. In the realm of mystical knowledge, the inclusion of *magic* is essential, as it is intertwined with the realm of religion. Simply put: the invisible world encompasses a vast expanse that includes the heavens, divine beings, nature spirits, and ancestral entities that could exert power.

The presence of the *spirit of the deceased* holds particular significance in African spirituality, as it is intertwined with the belief in the spirit realm (Kalilombe 1994:126). When discussing African spirituality, it is essential to acknowledge and understand the existence of this realm. Within the African spiritual framework, the presence of the spirit of the deceased is not viewed as something to be feared or avoided. Instead, it is embraced as an essential aspect of life and spirituality. The fundamental question is: “How successfully can the human community avail itself of the help of the invisible world?” (Kalilombe 1994:128).

Kalilombe’s article provides, by way of an introduction to this chapter, a clear *and comprehensive description* of the *many elements* forming a *typical traditional African spirituality*.¹⁸

Another scholar, **Vellem**, writes from a South African perspective and gives a strong *political slant* to his treatment. It is commonly known that embracing Western Christianity has both advantages and disadvantages. Africans were happy with their way of life prior to the introduction of *Western Christianity* to the continent. Before the West introduced Christianity, Africans had their own set of ethics and morals that influenced their lives. “Black African encounters with Christianity essentially meant an encounter with modernity”, according to Vellem (2014:1). Not only did Western Christianity alter not only African customs and values, but also Africans’ *spiritual make-up*. An example of how this change impacted on South Africa's Black population is that the West was responsible for the spread of apartheid in South Africa in addition to bringing Christianity with them. “In this manner, Western Christianity became part of the historical disruption of the moral and ethical dispensation of the life amongst black Africans” (Vellem 2014:1).

¹⁸ Something similar is found in the article by Zahan (2000).

With the help of the African Independent Churches (AICs), African religiosity *preserved the sanity* of the African soul during this violent time in the context of Western Christianity. One prominent person who opposed the colonial rulers' power was the *prophetess Nontetha Nkwenkwe* (Vellem 2014:2). Her *story* provides valuable insight into the role that women played in the apartheid era. She was a peace icon who advocated for Black Africans to unite. She promoted harmony between the *Amaqaba*, or people with red blankets, and the *Amagqoboka*, or people with education. The Black community was further divided into groups that accepted Christianity and those that did not. Nonthetha's contribution to unity turned her into a threat to the colonial masters. She became ill because the colonial regime wanted to silence her voice. The colonial masters were unable to comprehend Nonthetha's spiritual experience and misinterpreted it as a mental illness. They failed to grasp her world. "Unfortunately, the realm of the spirits as part of the view through which the imagery of the cosmos is formulated by black Africans, has become a constant casualty and victim of the most powerful in the world" (Vellem 2014:2).

The *mokhukhu* is another idea that provided sanity to Black Africans (Vellem 2014:2). This is basically a black shack in peri-urban South Africa, but it refers to a dance by the AICs in these conditions. It brought back memories of their struggle and past experiences of being uprooted and dumped. "When one looks at the various dimensions of life symbolized by mokhukhu, one cannot but conclude that African religiosity provided sanity to Black Africans in the living death" (Vellem 2014:3). It is important to note that these ideas gave the African people a sense of meaning. African religiosity offers hope for a *spirituality of liberation*. The spirit of *mokhukhu* has continued to grow. The idea behind this is that *mokhukhu* is both the sight and the witness of an oral history that is being performed and that serves as the foundation for liberation spirituality. This enacts the *agency of Black Africans* (Vellem 2014:3). We must never forget that the Western Christian faith equates to the cultural enslavement of the colonised Black Africans. This emphasis on agency as reaction to colonial dehumanisation is important. *Agency takes the shape of a woman and of a ritual*.

The *spirituality of liberation* is ingrained in African religiosity, forming the basis to understand it within South Africa's context. By the late twentieth century, AICs were linked to praxis, resistance, and liberation, reflecting African theology's contemplation on African religiosity. The appropriation of Black African cultural symbols in various spaces and locations in South Africa at present demonstrates the continuous use of *subversive tactics* that originated from the earliest interactions between the West and Africa. For instance, certain churches incorporate Black African concepts and terminologies into their formal discussions. Overall, a spirituality of woundedness characterises African religiosity, as depicted in this trajectory.

African religiosity is *practical and earthly*. It encompasses a person's entire religious journey, including beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and understanding of the transcendent. Any dualism between spirituality and concrete life must be avoided. There cannot be spirituality without life. Vellem (2014:5) emphasises two important points: first, spirituality must take into account the lives of the *poor*. Secondly, African religiosity is a *valuable resource* for nurturing spirituality in the face of a secularised eschatology. This seems a constructive insight, as it counters the often closed world-view of naturalism that leaves little space for the reality and work of the divine.

African theology conventionally focuses on either traditional culture or socio-political context. Vellem represents the latter. His *major contribution* is to demonstrate that the *agency of African people* has always been active since the colonial era, and that it has assumed the form of a retrieval in various ways of the African traditional heritage. Vellem gives precedence to the notion of liberation. One would have loved to see more specifically Christian motifs present in his treatment, but that has not been his focus.

In several of his articles (for example, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2022), **Nweke** represents some of the most recent reflections on African spirituality. Note should be taken of the *themes* that occur and recur in his research. He especially reflects on the revival of traditional African spirituality, the “demonisation” of this phenomenon, the potential of this spirituality to contribute to the socio-political renaissance in Africa, the appearance of “multiple religious belonging”, the relationship with Christianity, and the possibility of a “mutual enrichment”.

In recent times, Africa has seen a striking *increase* in the acceptance and realisation of African spiritualities (Nweke 2020:305f). *Numerous factors* that have aided in its growing acceptance and popularity among Africans can be identified for this resurgence. The *desire for spiritual fulfilment* is one of the main forces behind this trend. Many people have discovered comfort and significance in the age-old customs and rituals of their ancestors, as they seek a closer relationship with the Divine and their inner selves. Its focus on social values and group well-being offers a framework for resolving Africa's issues. It is possible to interpret the revival of traditional religion as an expression of the African people's desire to *assert their identity* and reclaim their cultural heritage. Many Africans are working to protect their distinctive customs and values as globalisation continues to change the contemporary world. African traditional religion is both a reminder of the continent's rich history and a potent symbol of *cultural resilience*.

For many years, African spirituality was viewed from the perspectives of Europeans and Westerners who *stigmatised* the existence of African spirituality. The rich cultural and spiritual legacy of Africa

was marginalised and undermined by this Eurocentric perspective, which also helped spread false beliefs and misconceptions about African spiritual practices. Nweke (2022:27) refers to the “demonization” of African spiritualities. Missionaries and colonial powers sought to convert Africans to Christianity, viewing their indigenous spiritual practices as primitive or even demonic. This forced assimilation and suppression of African spiritualities had a profound impact on the African continent, as traditional rituals and ceremonies were discouraged or even banned in some instances. Indigenous spiritualities faced significant threats and transformations under colonial rule across Africa. The advent of colonial powers drastically altered the customs and belief systems of the indigenous people. These spiritualities, which had their roots in the land, the natural world, and ancestors, were frequently viewed as being at odds with the colonists’ cultural and religious ideals. The colonial powers, who considered the native populations to be primitive or pagan, attempted to force their own religious practices and beliefs upon them.

Traditional spirituality is only now *starting to get the credit* it deserves. One reason for the neglect has been the lack of academic work on African spiritualities. Few scholars treat them as religious bodies with equal importance to “world religions”. The phrase ‘African *spiritualities*’ is used instead of African spirituality, preferred by many scholars. Numerous contexts and locations are home to a diverse array of spiritual practices. These customs include a wide range of beliefs, rites, and traditions that have developed over time and that are still followed by various communities worldwide. Hence, spirituality can be found in many different forms, from organised religions to prehistoric indigenous ceremonies. By using the term ‘spirituality’ instead of ‘religion’, scholars and researchers aim to capture the multifaceted nature of African belief systems, recognising the fluidity and adaptability that exist within these traditions. This *shift in terminology* has allowed for a broader acknowledgement of the intricate interplay between African cultures, spirituality, and the socio-political landscape. It has also allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the spiritual practices, rituals, and cosmologies that have shaped African communities throughout history. Moreover, emphasising spirituality over religion highlights the interconnectedness of African traditions with the natural world, ancestral wisdom, and the pursuit of personal growth and self-realisation.

There are *three concepts* to understanding African spirituality (Nweke 2020b:307). They are African spirituality as a *spiritual-cultural concept*, African spirituality as *an ideology*, and African spirituality as *of primary allegiance*. Below the surface of religious expressions lies a *spiritual-cultural inclination* or disposition that shapes religiosity. Secondly, it can express an anti-Western attitude, a *consciousness of freedom*. One of the key aspects of promoting pride and identity among African communities is the recognition and celebration of African history and culture. By acknowledging and

embracing their rich heritage, African communities can counter the erasure of their history and ensure that future generations are aware of their roots. This is particularly important in the face of historical injustices such as slavery, which have had a lasting impact on African societies. Thirdly, it conveys “a complete and unique form of religiosity” (Nweke 2020b:309). African spirituality is widely recognised as a rich and vibrant religious system, on par with other major world religions such as Christianity and Islam.

The community’s *ancestral spirituality* played a significant role in the lives of its members, extending far beyond a mere set of ritualistic practices. It was a source of strength and inspiration. As they engaged in these spiritual traditions, they found solace, wisdom, and a profound connection. The ancestral spirituality was alive, bringing together the past, present, and future, fostering a sense of continuity and harmony within the community. It was a sacred thread that bound them together, instilling a deep reverence for nature, the Divine, and the interconnectedness of all things. “One thing was obvious, the community ancestral spirituality was not just a spiritual/religious ritualistic phenomenon of some people, but an ideological bond of unity and identity holding all members of the community together” (Nweke 2020b:308).

The question that needs to be asked is: *What necessitated the rise of African spiritualities nowadays?* In many instances, the rise has been attributed to the growing social realities and existential struggles that individuals are experiencing (Nweke 2020b:310-314). *Afrocentrism* emerged as a response to the dominant Eurocentric narratives that have overshadowed and marginalised the achievements and contributions of African civilisations. One of the main foci of Afrocentrism is the *reclaiming and honouring of African identity*. By promoting a positive and empowering image of Africa and its people, Afrocentrism plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of pride and self-worth among African diaspora communities. Another key factor in the resurgence of African spiritualities is their *strong moral foundation*. This emphasis on morality sets them apart from other religions and makes them highly relevant. Morality plays a key role in African spiritualities, shaping beliefs, rituals, and ethical codes. “In their indigenous spiritualities, African peoples have held a strong belief that spiritual powers are deeply concerned about moral conduct of individuals and communities alike” (Nweke 2020b:312). By emphasising moral values, African spiritualities provide a framework for navigating life and fostering harmony within communities. This moral foundation guides individuals towards spiritual growth, social cohesion, and personal fulfilment.

The revival of Afro-spiritualities plays a crucial role in the *renaissance of Africa*. This is a key insight for Nweke (2020b:314). This revival process, known as the re-synchronisation process, is a powerful force that is reshaping the spiritual landscape of the continent. According to African spiritualities,

human activities encompass not only the earthly realm, but also the celestial realm where the gods reside. It is believed that the ancestors have a considerable influence on the human domain. *This interconnectedness between the two realms is at the core of African spirituality.* In essence, human activities occur simultaneously in both realms. The ancestors and the gods from the spirit world closely observe and interact with human beings based on their actions in the earthly realm. This dynamic relationship between the physical and spiritual realms creates a sense of accountability and responsibility for individuals, as their actions are believed to have consequences that transcend the material world. “This process, if properly analyzed and applied, would contribute immensely to the renaissance of Africa” (Nweke 2020b:315). The infusion of Afro-spiritualities into the sociopolitical fabric can serve as a powerful catalyst for positive change, enabling Africa to address the pressing challenges that the continent faces. This process includes *three intertwined phases* (Nweke 2020b:316), namely restructuring to communality, responsibility and consequentialism, as well as punitive consequences. Power lies in unity. When individuals come together, their collective strength becomes unstoppable. Unity has the ability to break down barriers and overcome obstacles that may seem insurmountable when faced alone. It fosters collaboration, cooperation, and a shared sense of purpose. In unity, there is resilience and the power to create positive change. There is a significant problem in the sociopolitical landscape of numerous African countries, where a glaring lack of political accountability persists. It is disheartening to witness how many leaders, particularly politicians, manage to evade punishment for their crimes and wrongdoings without facing any consequences whatsoever. How can corruption be effectively discouraged? The answer lies in implementing punitive measures to deter corruption. It is important to recognise the significance of these three phases to play a crucial role in re-instilling the *efficacy of African spirituality* within the community. This resurgence of African spirituality serves not only as a source of solace and guidance for individuals, but also as a *catalyst for social and political transformation.*

There is an urgent need and imperative to explore and establish a harmonious *coexistence with Christianity.* This calls for an in-depth understanding of both belief systems, acknowledging their unique contributions and embracing the potential for a cohesive fusion that celebrates the diversity and interconnectedness of African cultures. Nweke (2020b:320) argues that *a new missionary theology* for Africa is necessary, one that embraces the uniqueness and value of African spiritualities. In the past, Christianity overshadowed and Christianised these spiritualities, pushing African spiritualities to the side lines. Under the dominance of Christianity, community spirituality was marginalised, along with the ancestors and their history (Nweke 2020b:320). In light of the recent resurgence of ancestral spiritualities, a new approach seeks to eliminate segregation and promote mutual enrichment between Christianity and Afro-spiritualities.

This approach of *mutual enrichment* (Nweke 2019:252), although it has its own set of strengths, also comes with its fair share of limitations that necessitate careful evaluation. One area where it falls short is in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity. When it comes to inclusivity, Nweke (2020b:321) explains that a typical African spirituality is characterised by its fluidity in relation to other belief systems. This means that individuals can draw inspiration from various religions or the African community itself, resulting in a complex interplay of influences. On the other hand, exclusivity manifests itself in two distinct ways in African religious traditions. First, these traditions exhibit a flexible nature wherein different deities or gods are assigned specific responsibilities, and practitioners have the freedom to engage with them for different purposes (Nweke 2020b:321). Secondly, exclusivity is closely tied to communal identity, as active participation within the community is considered integral to African indigenous spirituality. Consequently, it is possible for individuals to be involved in multiple religions without necessarily experiencing a sense of belonging to any one in particular. Nweke's (2020a) notion of "multiple religious belonging" should also be considered in this instance.

Two important points should be noted about the pantheon of African spirituality. First, it is not polytheistic, but rather *monotheistic* in terms of spiritualities. This means that participating in another spirituality cannot be regarded as belonging to multiple religions with different concepts of God. Secondly, in order to comprehend the idea of "belonging" within the African community, we must understand their collective consciousness (Nweke 2020b:322). Every individual is conscious of his/her own existence. Therefore, if Christianity is to have a role in African spiritualities, the Christian identity must be flexible and subjective. This presents an opportunity for Christians to engage and broaden their understanding. Critical questions arise for Christianity (Nweke 2020a:86). Does Christianity have room for the involvement of other spiritualities? To what extent can other spiritualities be involved in Christianity?

Nweke's work is *important* and most *relevant*. It not only represents some of the most recent reflection, but it also points to crucial perspectives, for example the resurgence of traditional African spirituality and the connection with an African revival. Although Nweke does not give prominence to "agency", his emphasis on the "efficacy" of spirituality for social and political transformation is relevant and important to this study, when applied to women. African womanist spirituality should take note of Nweke's work. His work may require that one specify more clearly and emphatically

what the distinctive features of Christian spirituality are.¹⁹ In the encounter between the Christian faith and African (traditional) spirituality this may be necessary.

3.2 FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY IN GENERAL

This subsection addresses the reflection by scholars (for example, Carr, De Villiers, Rakoczy, and Longman) who have expressly written on women and spirituality, *in general*; the focus is not necessarily on Africa.

Women's spirituality is a relatively *new field* of study. Common inquiries include What is women's spirituality? and How does it differ from men's spirituality? The *spiritualities of men and women* are clearly different. While efforts are made to change this, care must be taken to ensure that no gender is treated as inferior to any other. According to Carr (1982:97), an American theologian, "[a]cknowledging differences does not necessarily require subversive concepts of complementarity, which essentially imply inferiority or subordination of one to the other". The distinction in no way denigrates the other gender.

Women's spirituality and feminist spirituality are not the same. "Women's spirituality might be studied across particular historical periods, or within particular religions, or racial or cultural groups ... and certain 'female' characteristics delineated" (Carr 1982:99). Feminist spirituality goes against the grain of women's spirituality, which is more reliant on nature and natural processes than culture. A feminist spirituality is "acutely aware of how women have historically and culturally been restricted to a small 'place' within the larger human (male) 'world' and recognizes the cultural and religious precepts that deprive women of their rights ... and bear the traces of the central elements of feminist consciousness" (Carr 1982:99). Feminist spirituality considers the human aspect of *oppression*, particularly the connections between sexism, racism, and elitism. Its objective is to reveal each person's true freedom. It focuses on interdependent modes of relationship over against hierarchical and dominating ones. This kind of spirituality encourages everyone to be autonomous, self-actualised, and self-transcendent (Carr 1982:100). Feminist spirituality aims to establish a *more inclusive* society, by contesting established power structures and oppressive systems. It acknowledges the *interdependence* of all living things and fosters empathy and a sense of community.

A Christian feminist spirituality is *universal* in its vision and acknowledges the *violence* that women endure, the exploitation or dominance of men over women. It gives women's circumstances *a voice*

¹⁹ See the section in the previous chapter.

and offers hope. “Strictly feminist spirituality, with its particular stress on female bonding in sisterhood, affirmation of the self-actualization and self-transcendence of women and interrelationships among sexism, racism and classism is, one hopes, a temporary stage on the way to a fuller human spirituality” (Carr 1982:101).

In the past few years, *research on women’s spirituality* has become increasingly prominent. This field of study attempts to explain the various ways in which women relate to the Divine and their inner selves by comprehending and investigating the *distinctive spiritual experiences* of women. In an effort to understand the nuances that influence women’s spiritual journeys, it addresses the issues of what women’s spirituality comprises and how it varies from men’s spirituality. Scholars and researchers examine the *lived experiences, beliefs, and practices* of women from diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. Spirituality could be both *unconscious and conscious*. It is common to develop the conscious side of spirituality by engaging in activities such as meditation, prayer, or philosophical discourse. Our spiritual experience becomes more integrated and holistic when we combine the conscious and unconscious elements of spirituality.

One essential idea found in feminist spirituality is the *critique of hierarchy*. Gender can have a significant impact on spirituality because it affects how we view and interact with our spiritual selves. Within different societal structures, power dynamics project patriarchal assumptions. These relationships frequently support a system that upholds gender inequality and favours male dominance. These power dynamics also support negative stereotypes and social norms. In order to build a more just and inclusive society that embraces people of all genders, it is imperative to question and undermine these presumptions.

Adopting a feminist spirituality gives people the ability to confront and change patriarchal systems that uphold injustice and inequality. It aims to promote *awareness* and encourage individuals to be self-consciously *critical* of cultural and religious ideologies that restrict women’s opportunities. “This critical stance includes a vision of the world in which genuine mutuality, reciprocity and equality might prevail” (Carr 1982:100). Feminist spirituality is a *call to action*, inviting individuals to actively engage in the pursuit of equality, justice, and liberation for all. There have always been positive and negative interpretations of this viewpoint. On the one hand, it discourages women from accepting cultural and religious norms that confine them to subservient roles. On the other hand, this critical viewpoint imagines a world of true equality and mutuality.

It is important to create *safe spaces* where women can fully explore their spiritual identities and experiences. These safe spaces are places where women can find comfort, support, and inspiration

to embrace their spiritual independence and develop a strong sense of community among like-minded people who share their pursuit of spiritual development and *self-realisation*. It creates a supportive network. Such a safe space enables women to make their *own choices*, confront oppressive norms, and create a world where their spiritual journeys are respected. It has long been believed that women do not support one another. But it is critical to dispel this myth. It is time to let go of the notion that women are rivals and celebrate the power that comes from encouraging and supporting one another instead. There should be a strong sense of friendship, *sisterhood*, and female bonding (Carr 1982:101).

Carr mentions a feminist spirituality that is *inclusive of men*. This method seeks to dismantle established patriarchal structures and establish a safe space where people of all genders can explore and engage in empowering spiritual exploration. People can promote equality and unity, by adopting a spirituality that includes men, enabling everyone to have a more comprehensive and inclusive spiritual experience.

Carr (1982:100), emphasising the *uniqueness of each woman* and the *importance of narrative* makes the following statement of a feminist spiritual approach: “it would recognise the uniqueness of each individual as she tells her own story (there is no universal women’s experience) and affirm each one as she strives to make her own choices”.

Carr’s article (1982) already points to the *central and crucial motifs* of a feminist spirituality, namely critique of patriarchy and oppression, the importance of interdependent relationships, the emphasis on experience, the importance of safe spaces, and sisterhood. She does not explore the importance of *storytelling*, but the awareness is already present. *Agency* as notion is not present, but when she speaks of, for example, “making choices”, “self-actualization”, or “autonomy”, the very idea or dynamic is prominently present.

De Villiers (1999) writes comprehensively about feminist spirituality. He was arguably one of the first male theologians in South Africa who took note of this development. This has emerged as a dominant and influential movement, coinciding with the growing interest in spirituality that has intrigued people from all walks of life. A significant awakening occurred in the 1980s when feminist researchers and activists started exploring the fields of spirituality. Their conversation was sparked by the sociopolitical engagement with structures that violate women’s rights. As a result, formal courses on feminist spirituality were introduced in the United States. Ever since, interest in the topic of feminist spirituality has grown. Feminist spirituality is both *a movement* and *a discipline*.

Recent changes in the understanding of the term result from an inclusive and *wide definition of spirituality* (De Villiers 1999:886). The notion of spirituality has come to be understood as “experienced faith”. This elaborate perspective acknowledges that spirituality is present in many aspects of everyday life and is not only found in religious activities. This all-encompassing method of approaching spirituality recognises that faith is a lived experience rather than merely a collection of theoretical ideas.

The conventional divide between *spirituality and theology* is contested by feminist spirituality (De Villiers 1999:888). It acknowledges the connection between these two elements and the fact that they should not be viewed as distinct issues. This viewpoint recognises that, within theological and doctrinal frameworks, women have frequently been marginalised and disadvantaged. It is acknowledged that various theological stances can give rise to various manifestations of women’s spirituality. Feminist spirituality aims to challenge the patriarchal structures that have restricted *women’s voices* and participation in religious practices, by rejecting the traditional separation between theology and spirituality. Doctrine provides spiritual seekers with a sense of direction and purpose, by offering a framework for comprehending the world and their place in it.

The approach of feminist spirituality is complex and multidimensional, interacting with different theological frameworks such as *liberation theology* and other *contextual theologies*. These frameworks’ emphasis on *praxis* and the necessity of opposing and changing oppressive social structures is one of their main points of similarity. *Social analysis* is essential to feminist spirituality because it offers a critical lens through which to scrutinise the ways in which patriarchal systems uphold injustice and inequality.

Contextual theology and feminist spirituality share certain commonalities. For example, it has a *transformative purpose* to helping women experience their faith. “In this theology, the liberation function of theological understanding does not consist in explaining or giving meaning to an existing reality or to faith threatened by a particular situation, but in transforming a reality” (De Villiers 1999:891). This theology emphasises *praxis* as one of its defining characteristics. Being transformative in a specific setting and context is its primary objective. When feminist spirituality discusses women’s spirituality, it finds itself operating with a *transformational agenda*. A true spirituality challenges the systems that prevent women from being viewed as equal partners. It also speaks out against injustices.

Contextual theologies use *analysis* as tool to know how power is distributed. Feminist spirituality examines the position that women are given in society, in order to make sense of the circumstances.

The analytical stage is vital to feminist spirituality and frequently replaces Scripture as the first point of reference. Scripture might only be relevant once the analysis is completed. Analysis is the deliberate examination of reality through the use of social models. The foundation of visionary politics is often spirituality. Proponents opine that spirituality is an integral and essential part of their methodology, not simply an optional add-on. For them, their spirituality shapes their actions in the world and their understanding of theology.

Feminist spirituality needed to *critique specific things*. In this instance, spirituality as a “devotion” came under fire. As it had no bearing on people’s daily lives and was not grounded in reality, this type of spirituality has been met with scepticism. This shows how our understanding of spirituality has changed over the years. Instead of a *private spirituality*, we must have a spirituality that also speaks to the *public life*. Over the years, feminist spirituality has registered a high increase of a so-called “privatized spirituality”, a tradition that has threatened women’s well-being as it places men as legitimate thinkers. “Traditionally women were associated with subjectivity and emotion, while men were regarded by themselves as the objective, rational and therefore more legitimate thinkers” (De Villiers 1999:897). This kind of approach poses a threat to women’s activity and spirituality. Feminist spirituality rejects this position and seeks a spirituality that has a direct link to public life.

The *relevance of De Villiers’ article* lies in five areas. He realised some time ago that the importance of this form of spirituality is a major development in theology. His acquaintance of spirituality as academic discipline sets an example of how a discussion should proceed. He gives a good historical and theological overview of the genesis of feminist spirituality, in general. De Villiers recognises the crucial role of theology in relation to spirituality. He is also acutely aware of the *intersection with politics*. He does not give prominence to narrative or agency, but his strong emphasis on spirituality and politics and the rejection of private devotion are in line with a more recent focus on agency.

Rakoczy (2011), a South African Catholic theologian, focuses on *experience* as one of feminist theology’s central themes. Feminist theologians have always been critical that experience is usually viewed from a male perspective because women were consistently left out. Experience differs widely based on racial, socio-economic, religious, and other variables. In popular narratives, the experiences of marginalised groups such as women of colour have frequently been disregarded. Women’s experiences are complex, touching on issues related to the body, society, history, private lives, and religion. It is more accurate to view “difference” as a beneficial component of “plurality” rather than as a flaw. “Experience is neither global nor neutral, but is diverse according to race, class, education, social location, religion, etc” (Rakoczy 2011:35). Speaking from the periphery of society

offers a distinctive viewpoint that facilitates the investigation of novel opinions and the identification of new prospects for unity.

Feminism is inextricably linked to the marginalised position of women. This viewpoint offers women the ability to speak from their own experiences and add a voice for change that affects not only themselves, but also other people and social institutions. Women require an internal source of strength, which they can only access by beginning to hear the quiet voices inside of them. “Women experience a shift from reliance on external authorities to claiming their own internal authority and moral agency” (Rakoczy 2011:37). *Storytelling* has sufficient positive power. Hope and bravery are inspired by the tales of women’s encounters with God, other people, their cultures, and historical settings.

Rakoczy (2011:38-53) recounts in detail the *life stories of three women*, Mary Ward, Florence Nightingale, and Reverend Mbanjwa, providing compelling examples of how they were able to give their own and others’ lives a sense of meaning and purpose, by believing in their own personal experiences, even when those experiences went against social or religious norms. These women disobeyed social norms and set out on life-changing adventures that not only impacted on the world, but also moulded their own destinies, by having the courage to listen to their inner voices. They broke through the barriers of conventional religious teachings and forged a more intimate and profound spiritual experience because of their willingness to challenge the status quo. Their experiences serve as a reminder that we can grow personally, gain empowerment, and gain a better understanding of the sacred, by accepting our own distinct experiences and viewpoints. These extraordinary women encourage us to live our lives guided by the transformative power of our own truths and to trust our own inner wisdom, by sharing their personal stories. The lesson is that, despite coming from diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, one aspect persisted, namely being faithful to God entails having faith in God’s experience regardless of the circumstances.

Rakoczy’s perspectives are exceptionally important and *relevant* to this study, especially her emphasis on *stories*. She has set an example for the study of African womanist spirituality.²⁰ This research takes her insights further.

Longman’s (2018) study, conducted in Western Europe, specifically in Belgium, The Netherlands, and Germany, examines *women’s circles* through participant observation and interviews. The research on femininity and sisterhood concepts and behaviours within these circles demonstrates that

²⁰ Attention should be paid to Rakoczy’s (2000:74) article, wherein she emphasises “wholeness”, the body, affect, and the community.

women's circles serve as a platform for *post-secular empowerment*, calling into question the prevalent idea of "new femininity" within the context of modern women's spirituality and the so-called well-being culture. According to the research, these gatherings provide a unique and empowering environment for women to explore and express their agency and subjectivity. "Women's Circles are non-institutionalized, recurrent (often monthly) gatherings of which the objective is to be among women in order to experience, celebrate, and re/connect with 'the feminine'" (Longman 2018:2). These circles provide a space that exists outside the confines of traditional patriarchal religions. They have potential for women's empowerment. It is clear that these circles were crucial in helping women in their communities feel supported and empowered. Women find inspiration and support in these circles, which also help them feel more connected to one another and encourage personal development.²¹

In the context of wellness, "sisterhood" becomes a potent idea that suggests a more inclusive and group-oriented strategy. *Sisterhood* places a strong emphasis on the value of female unity, while promoting cooperation, empowerment, and support. Sisterhood advocates for an inclusive approach to well-being, by promoting a sense of community and unity. It acknowledges that real well-being necessitates active participation and goes beyond oneself. In contrast to the rivalry and mistrust among women nowadays, the idea of sisterhood represents a sense of *solidarity*, bonding, and deep connection. Sisterhood provides women with comfort, motivation, and the bravery to question the *status quo*, resulting in a strong and transforming sense of unity. Sisterhood is a testament to the resilience and strength of women, showcasing their ability to overcome obstacles and create meaningful change in the world. It is a celebration of the unique experiences and perspectives that women bring, reminding them all of the importance of fostering a sense of community and support among women everywhere.

Post-secular theory highlights the paradoxical contemporary situation, in which secularisation and religious revival coexist. Feminism is experiencing a significant *change*, referred to as the "post-secular turn". In the past, there was a perceived divide between religious and secular feminist perspectives, with secular feminists often considering religion as a hindrance to women's liberation. The idea that religion is inherently oppressive to women is, nevertheless, beginning to be recognised as untrue in certain instances. "The past two decades have seen a sudden expansion in social research on the impact of 'lived religion' for women's rights and empowerment" (Longman 2018:3). It is clear that feminism is increasingly recognising and engaging with the various ways in which

²¹ Ironically, women's fellowships in Zambia are part of patriarchal denominations and happen "within" these churches and are spaces of asserting agency.

religion influences and shapes women's lives. Rather than outright dismissing religion as patriarchal, there is a growing acknowledgment of its significance and its potential to empower women. This shift in perspective can be regarded as a 'post-secular turn', where non-secular contexts are being acknowledged as valid spaces for women to exercise their agency and assert their rights.

These kinds of circles usually emphasise *qualities* such as intuition, empathy, and nurturing that have long been associated with *femininity*. There seems to be a focus on reconnecting with, and celebrating a rather essentialist notion of "the feminine" in women's circles. These circles give women the freedom to be authentic and explore their *hidden femininity*, in contrast to competitive settings. These communities celebrate femininity, which is frequently disregarded in feminist discourse, via embodied practices and a variety of gender expressions. The idea behind "women's space" is to create a private, secure space rather than to exclude men. These communities offer an alternative to conventional ideas of dominance and control, by defining feminine power as being characterised by *receptivity, listening, and responsibility*. Women's circles promote relationships via *storytelling*, physical contact, sisterhood, and self-empowerment.

In terms of *agency*, Longman (2018:10) makes a crucial observation concerning agency: "Opposed to theorizations of women's agency that focus on modes of resistance or complicity in gender-traditional religions, I suggest that in women's circles in a more nomadic, affective, and affirmative sense, agency emerges through a re-valuation of femininity that involves a more open-ended explorative, imaginative, and experiential process with regards to gender identity and sexual difference." Circles represent a *woman-centred ethos* that investigates femininity in a creative way, even though they do not openly identify as feminists. They uphold an affirmative position while fostering individual and group agency.

Longman's study is interesting and *relevant*. It confirms the role and impact of "women circles", which are crucial in Africa. It removes the tension between spirituality and institutionalised religion with her reference, in Europe, of a post-secular culture. This is in line with the African reality. The most important contribution is her re-definition of agency, not in terms of resistance, but in terms of affectivity and affirmation.

3.3 EXCURSION – THE CIRCLE OF CONCERNED AFRICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIANs AND NARRATIVITY

In 1989, the Circle was established in Accra, Ghana.²² The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and African women theologians both provided inspiration and support its establishment. Since the group's founding, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has served as its leader. Since then, the Circle has grown to include national chapters and regional representation. Africa's regions are all represented. Starting at the bottom, the Circle represents the *voiceless*. "African women theologians purposed to be the voice of the voiceless through research and documentation of theology of Africa women, especially at the grassroot level" (Ayanga 2016a:1).

Among the many goals of the Circle are publications and research on matters pertaining to women. The other goal is to give women a place where they feel comfortable being who they are. Their *life experiences* contribute to the *stories* that form theologies. The Circle also offers women mentorship. "The mentoring initiative assists emerging and younger women in the fields of academia, religion, and culture in realizing the value of their own and other women's stories" (Ayanga 2016a:1). This is critical to the Circle's future because it brings in younger women to take the place of the ageing ones. This will be a contribution of the Circle's performance from the beginning.

Key to its core objective, the Circle is to be the voice of the African woman at the grassroots level through research and documentation, with raw data coming from the experiences of women. There has always been a missing gap and, in the Circle, the women strive to bridge that gap. The members are made aware of the fact that this task of being the *voice of the voiceless* is without other negative condition or ailment that affect women. How does one define voiceless? Ayanga (2016a:2) mentions that "voiceless" may mean a state of having no voice, but it can also mean uttering something without the vibration of the vocal chords. Being voiceless can indicate a *lack of dignity* when a person is unable to communicate his/her own dignity. It might also suggest that people close to the person have failed or are uninterested. Being voiceless also implies that a person is never fully him-/herself when s/he remains silent. This implies that the silent person stays invisible. The Circle has assumed accountability for revealing and contesting patriarchal establishments.

When it comes to practising theology, the Circle has adopted a *particular methodology*. Since women began sharing their stories, Circle theology has always practised a *narrative theology*, whereby fresh stories and perspectives are created. The new story contributes to the development of self-

²² Fiedler (2017) gives a detailed history. Landman (2022:14) provides a particularly helpful overview of the 5 Pan-African Conferences.

awareness for the future. Women tell their stories as a means of doing theology, by using unprocessed data. When African women consider their own experiences, they are also viewed as *active participants* in life. “The telling of the story gives voice to women and their lived experiences. It makes the women, their lives and their experiences both audible and visible” (Ayanga 2016a:3). When stories are told, *two goals* are accomplished. First, they speak about their experiences, and then they recognise the differences as well as the *commonalities* between them. In addition, it aids their *analysis* of the events in the context of their culture and religious beliefs. This focus on narrativity should be strongly emphasised. Mombo (2003:91) also underlines this in her study on the Circle’s approach to theology: “the Circle was created to recreate and retrieve women’s stories so that they can become an integral part of the story of the church and of Africa as a whole”.

Narratives have come to serve as the foundational information for the Circle publications.²³ *Publications and research* have taken on the role of a voice for the voiceless in academia and in society at large. The Circle was founded during the period of the HIV pandemic, when women were held responsible for the illness. The ways in which religion, culture, and social customs contributed to the vulnerability of women have been examined and led to a large number of publications.

The group boasts of having produced many publications since its founding, but these were not sold, most likely because people believed that they were merely a means of obtaining money. Another issue is that no one was reading about women theologians because the libraries did not obtain these publications. “These publications were not being read because they were not reaching the intended audience, which was hindering the Circle’s growth” (Ayanga 2016a:4). Some women were *resistant to change*, unconcerned with issues pertaining to women, and believed that things ought to stay as they are.²⁴

The Circle’s *goals* included bringing attention to women and giving them a voice, as well as raising awareness of those who had been disregarded in both the community and the church. This challenged the women to be conscious of their own existence and of their *capacity to define their own identities*. It speaks not only to the communities but also to the women directly. It stresses the need to support one another and assist those who are weaker. Being self-aware facilitates a deeper

²³ In a most recent publication, the volume celebrating the Circle’s 6th Pan African Conference, this focus on stories of women is seen again. See Mwale, Gabaitse, Kobo & Tembo (2024). Interestingly, two chapters, 19 & 20, are devoted to two women of Zambia – O Bula and P M Kabonde.

²⁴ In her assessment of the Circle, Labeodan (2016:4-6) mentions interesting challenges the Circle faced in her early days and later in her functioning – resistance to the initiative by Oduyoye, accusation that the Circle amounts only to imitation of the West, struggles with publications, friction between Anglophone and Francophone regions, and the temptation to be elitist with the exclusion of illiterate women.

understanding of God. Theologians working in the circles have drawn attention to the silent majority sitting in church pews and the absence of women from pulpits and theological schools.

During the missionary era,²⁵ women had no opportunities for *theological education*. This resulted from women not being considered at the time. This was not the case in the AICs, where both men and women were not required to have formal theological training. The Holy Spirit's guidance was the only prerequisite. Women only started pursuing higher education after gaining political independence. At public universities, a small number of women were admitted to the departments of religion.

One aspect of the Circle should be mentioned, namely its preference for the label "*womanist*" instead of "*feminist*". The Circle shares many commonalities with theologians and women from the North, but they consider their plight as more drastic. They also have to struggle against issues of class and race. Hence, according to Mombo (2003:93), "the Circle members would prefer to identify themselves with the womanist, rather than feminist, struggles to reflect the inclusive nature of their struggles".

In her assessment of the Circle, Labeodan (2016:4) mentions that, since 2007, there has been "a lull in the activities of the Circle; some have actually asked if the Circle is still active". The Circle's thirtieth existence was celebrated with a 5th Pan African Conference on the theme "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in religious imagination" in 2019 (see Mombo 2023:60, especially footnote 12 on the subsequent publications). Despite some internal organisational challenges, the Circle is definitely alive and continues to publish significant work (see also Dube 2024, later in this chapter).

It may be relevant to refer explicitly in this section to Mercy Oduyoye (1933-). In her excellent overview of Oduyoye's life and theological contribution, Landman (2007:187) refers to her as the "Mother of our stories". Her insistence on the retrieval of women's stories in church and society, as one of the major sources of doing theology, makes her so outstanding in the African context. We could briefly listen to some of her views on spirituality (*the discussion will continue in section 3.4*).

It is observed among the group of African women theologians who are deeply concerned that *Christian spirituality* has made a great contribution. Numerous academics have written about this topic to highlight the contributions made by women. However, the phrase 'Christian spirituality' has not appeared frequently in works by African women writers. Spirituality basically reacts to the meaning of 1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common

²⁵ In the case of the Reformed Church in Zambia, one can roughly date this from 1898 till 1966, the beginning of missionary work till the church received autonomy from the "mother-church".

good". Women have learned to survive through their struggles. Typically, women aspire to make *greater sacrifices*, but occasionally these sacrifices are misguided and result in low self-esteem. According to Oduyoye (2019:22), "[t]his can occasionally turn into needless suffering, and women develop a victim mentality that some mistake for a willingness to give their lives". This "spirituality" encourages and sustains unnecessary self-embarrassment and low self-esteem. Women have always prioritised others over themselves, a practice that has increased men's entitlement to mistreat women.

Oduyoye uses terms such as *empowerment, justice, mutual respect, struggle, and sustenance* to describe spirituality. These contribute to improving the lives of women and other groups. Spirituality of resistance, spirituality of reconciliation, and discipleship are a few of the buzzwords. These provide a more comprehensive definition of spirituality and help us understand what they are dealing with. Oduyoye (2019:22) mentions that spirituality is an "integrated and integrative dimension of the life of faith"; it is "a more holistic approach to theology ... it is a whole way of life; it is an experiential way of living one's faith". For a Christian, it emphasises a lived Gospel, one that responds to who Jesus is in the face of political, social, environmental, cultural, and economic contexts of people's lives.

Although modern research is discovering a rich history of women's spirituality, some women's spiritual expressions have ended in death because they were thought to be witches. Christian spirituality promotes *hospitality* to all and opens doors to the inclusiveness of human love according to Oduyoye (2019:23),²⁶ "One can never say no to the poor or pick and choose whom to show the love of God to, because the gift of the spirit is given to the individual for the common good." We can see God in *everyone*.

The words "become action" is the *focus* of the concerned African women theologians. It pushes women to *start overcoming* their oppressive circumstances. Scripture's call for wholeness serves as the inspiration for this. "We of the Circle are together in our affirmation that narratives of 'grant me justice' in both Old and New Testament urge us on to a Christianity of acting for the wholeness of the whole community, as well as for the individual" (Oduyoye 2019:23). Women must rise up and unite to fight injustices. The idea of "rise up" is central to the Circle. Oredein (2023:56), an authority on the theology of Oduyoye, states in this regard that "[t]he biblical mandate 'Talitha Cum!' (Mark 5:41) captures the Circle's origin, purpose and necessity". The Circle members continue to challenge and ask questions to live and act for others.

²⁶ Oduyoye (2001:90-109) develops the relationship between spirituality and hospitality in detail.

Oduyoye distinguishes between *two types of spirituality*: the spirituality of reconstruction and the spirituality of resistance. They aim to change the communities from which these women come. The spiritual significance of naming the opposition to traditional, stagnant culture is an exploration of a spirituality that seeks alternatives under trying circumstances.

It is clear from this brief attention to the Circle and from Oduyoye that the *twin motifs* employed in this research – *agency and narrative* – are central in their approach to women and to spirituality. In all the work discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2, none gives such a joint emphasis as we find in Oduyoye and the Circle. This must be regarded as their decisive theological contribution.

3.4 AFRICAN WOMANIST SPIRITUALITY

In this section, the views of Oduyoye, Mokwena, Kobo, Njoroge, and Dube²⁷ provide an insight into the motifs and approaches to African womanist spirituality.

In her contribution to spirituality and in quoting a famous biblical scripture “The fool says in his heart ‘There is no God’”, **Oduyoye** (1997-1998:494) asserts that there are no such ‘fools’ in traditional Africa, as God is present everywhere. Africans believe in God. Africans also *experience God* as a constant participant in the lives of his people. “God is a constant participant in the affairs of human beings, judging by the everyday language of west Africans of my experience” (Oduyoye 1997-1998:494). The language used depicts the Africans’ experience of being a participant in the universe. The Akan people will say the word equivalent to “by God’s grace” or *Nsem nyina ne onyame*, meaning “all things/affairs of God”. “Nothing and no situation is without God” (Oduyoye 1997-1998:494). This belief is crucial to note, as it gives a view of how Africans see God. Oduyoye writes from an Akan perspective, but this is representative of much of Africa.

The notable feature in traditional religion is the experience that says “nothing happens without God”. Oduyoye (1997-1998:495) adds: “The African view of the world is nourished by a cosmology that is founded on a source being, the supreme God, and other divine beings that are associated with God”. God is the foundation of life and God sustains it. God lives on, God is immortal.

The way in which Africans experience God is depicted in the *language* used about God. “What needs to be said is that these names are still current and that more names descriptive of people’s experience of God are available in proverbs, songs, and prayers.” (Oduyoye 1997-1998:495). The names describe the character of God and how people experience God. In some situations, symbols were used to describe God. Oduyoye (1997-1998:495) takes an *example* of the Akan of Ghana where

²⁷ References will be provided in the discussion.

the *Adinkra symbol* is used. It is a minuscule figure for gold weights and it says "I depend on God and not on myself." The symbol *Gye Nyame* is the Akan expression of the belief that without God nothing holds together. The examples show that words are limited to express one's experience of God.

There is a renewed interest in the study of other religions. This kind of interest permeates all cultural norms and expresses the African experiences of God. It is a belief rooted in the knowledge that all people are *related to one another*. Africans believe that, because God created and sustains everything, there is a relationship between human beings and God, as well as a need to respect the environment and other natural phenomena. "All human relations are affected by the belief that all belong together in God. *Onyame nti* (because of God, or for the sake of God), we act or refrain from acting" (Oduyoye 1997-1998:496). Oredein (2023:52) comments in this regard that relationships, especially right relationships, are critical to understanding Oduyoye's theology.

People sometimes attribute God's anger to the dark cloud that appears prior to a rainstorm, but other people attribute it to the rain's blessings. "We do not attribute excessive rain or flooding to God, but rather to the wrath of nature's deities or our ancestors, whom we may have offended through unethical actions or a lack of respect for matters pertaining to the afterlife" (Oduyoye 1997-1998:496). For an African, the *experience of good and evil* is still difficult. Some claim that God is the source of both good and evil, but God also provides the remedy when he creates a disease.

Human beings are completely *dependent* on God, and this is also true in African religion. The prayers offered show how reliant we are on God. God is regarded as the ultimate recipient of all prayers. Every libation thus begins with an invocation of God, who has always been with Africans as the Alpha and Omega. The phrase "God will pay you back" instils fear in many people. This fear arises because the consequences may rebound on them. God is also perceived as someone who is concerned about the events occurring in the universe and who protects the weak. God provides a means of escape even from natural disasters, as Oduyoye (1997-1998:497) acknowledges: "Often, when children and others considered weak in society escape calamity, all agree that it is God." In this way, God is experienced as a caring parent or grandparent who loves us and offers protection at all times. Some refer to God as a mother, while others refer to God as a father. Human beings feel a sense of closeness to God. It can be said that the experiences of God in African traditional religion vary depending on the circumstances of his people.

Oduyoye (1997-1998:497) refers to *shifts in God language*. Conventional Christian terminology regarding God has been adjusted to reflect people's experiences. The emergence of AICs has given meaning to the encounter with God. For example, Africans encounter a loving and compassionate

God in the church founded by Shembe, one of the AIC's original figures. For the majority of South Africans, the experience of *God as a healer* and *comrade on life's journey* is crucial. The AICs are reviving the African religion that was once eradicated by missionaries who arrived in South Africa. According to Oduyoye (1997-1998:498), "[i]t has taken the AICs to re-establish African language about God in the vocabulary of African Christians". A new profile of who God is, is being established and the presence of God is being felt. A new language – *God is freedom* – is being developed, particularly in reference to South Africa. Although this is "old" biblical language, the appropriation and emphasis are new developments in theology. The oppressed are called by God, who is freedom, from oppression into wholeness in life. "God is this wholeness which exists in the spaces between people when their dignity and worth is mutually affirmed in love, truth, honesty and caring warmth" (Oduyoye 1997-1998:499). God is no longer viewed in patriarchal terms but rather as the God of truth and freedom, a companion and friend in the fight for liberation.

South Africa has battled to eradicate patriarchal models for a long time. Numerous writers have joined the movement to denounce men's dominance over women in an attempt to accomplish this. This viewpoint is held by many, including the group of African women theologians of the Circle. When one is affected by the church and its demands for women's obedience, it is challenging to perceive *God as empowering*. For African women, it is challenging to perceive God as loving and to anticipate that other women will also love God. However, women have different experiences with God, and they refuse to submit to a culture that obscures God's true nature. "They experience God as empowering them with a spirituality of resistance to dehumanization" (Oduyoye 1997-1998:500). These women articulate their experience of God in terms of a theology of creation and the meaning of God's being in Christ. The doctrine of Christology is centred on the theme of Christ the liberator.

Oduyoye's contribution is beyond measure. We can only highlight a few. The centrality of storytelling, of rising up (claiming agency), of spirituality as such, of right relationships, of resistance, of hospitality, of the presence of God, and of the naming of God in terms of freedom and empowerment are all seminal perspectives. We cannot think about African womanist theology without acknowledging her work. This study stands fully in extending her legacy.

In her contribution **Mokwena** (2004) is interested in traditional African spirituality and how it relates to contemporary gender consciousness. Currently, a large portion of available religious resources or literature are primarily Western understandings and are not relevant to non-Western cultures. African religion can be understood through the lens of Africanist churches and *traditional forms of healing*. She (2004:87) points out that, since traditional African healing does not discuss doctrine or dogma, it cannot be discussed in relation to any religion. Rather, Mokwena attempts to understand

African traditional healing as a type of spiritual practice, which is of specific interest in this instance. According to Mokwena (2004:87), spirituality “gives room to participate in sacred practices on one’s own terms because it is not tied down to any specific belief system”. It appears that women, who view religion as a construct of their own spiritual expression, find this acceptable.

Religious historians from diverse cultures usually provide accounts of religious experiences from the perspective of men; women’s roles are ignored. In order to prevent others from speaking for African women, Mokwena decided to compile *women’s voices* as a guiding tool for understanding women’s experiences. The account of five *female traditional healers*, who have been using their gifts for over ten years, has been investigated. The women talk about their healing experiences. According to Mokwena (2004:88), “I offer these women’s voices as an opening up of much needed discourse on gender and traditional African healing.”

Ancestors are a key component of traditional African healing. Ancestors greatly influence the living. Occasionally, they function via the conventional healer (Mokwena 2004:94). Typically, many spirits would be present in the initiator. These spirits would be in charge of her, and occasionally, if a female healer, for example, had a male ancestor, it would affect her close relationships with other men. Mokwena (2004:89) observes: “When it comes to men consulting female healers and vice versa, it is strange because a woman feels comfortable undressing in front of a male traditional healer but feels uncomfortable doing so when she goes to a Western doctor.” When dealing with situations of this nature, a traditional healer must ask for a male counterpart, or a female counterpart if the client is a woman. Traditional healers of both sexes do confer with one another because of documented instances of *sexual harassment*. It can be argued that, despite their differences, men and women typically work together. Sexual abuse must be addressed, in order to deal adequately with the issue.

Mokwena’s article provides *two intriguing emphases*: healing as spiritual practice, and the compilation of the voices of female traditional healers. These should be taken note of.

Kobo’s work represents the contribution and insight of a young generation of African female scholars and focuses on an interpretation of African woman’s pseudo-spirituality through a case study of the *Limanyano* community in the Southern African Uniting Presbyterian Church. The harshness of this world presents many challenges for women. Women bear additional burdens from daily living. A woman is always constantly praying in the Limanyano light. According to Kobo, *prayer* has become extremely important to women, and at these times, they are often seen crying. According to Kobo (2018:1), “[i]t is very rare in my context to see or hear an African woman praying without shedding a tear”. As women conclude liturgical services with tears in their eyes, prayer becomes increasingly

significant. Liturgical practice and spirituality are related. It serves as a spiritual resource for all modern Christians.

Kobo refers to the women in the Marikana massacre.²⁸ These women were mourning the horrific deaths of their loved ones, husbands, sons, and brothers at the hands of the police. This deed rendered numerous women childless or widowed, and left children without parents. It was an agonised cry. We may wonder what a prayer means to a Marikana woman. What role does Christianity play in the midst of pain? What makes an African woman cry? What implication does this cry have on her spirituality?

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) shaped theological thinking with a statement titled “The cry for a life-spirituality of the Third World” during their third General Assembly meeting (1992). Black liberation theology was viewed as a response to a historical period that began and still persists with Trans-African slavery, “the cry of black African women, women in diasporas, women in Latin America, women in the global South up to the end of apartheid” (Kobo 2018:2). The notion of “cry” remains an important motif and notion for women. It reveals the *repressive structures* that endanger women’s lives, by making them victims and weak targets of a power structure that exploited labour. In the middle of suffering, the cry is a *cry for life*. “It speaks to structures that keep them at the same trenches of destitution and is a cry for material conditions” (Kobo 2018:2). There are many *different forms of oppression* such as cultural imperialism, violence, exploitation, marginalisation, and helplessness. All of these forms of oppression affect women. It is important to note that the General Assembly of EATWOT concluded that this *cry for life* was one that *denies victory to torture*, rather than one of sorrow, despair, or hopelessness. Thrice as *many struggles* have been experienced by South African women. Along with challenging the patriarchal culture of subordination, they struggle on issues of *race, class, and gender* (Kobo 2018:3). These capture the negative aspects of the numerous experiences of women.

There are countless untold tales of women who have faced various hardships, and tragically some of the oppression they have endured has even been theologically and ecclesiastically justified. The *Scripture* has often been used to justify the oppression of women. For example, the Bible was the source of the South African apartheid narrative. “This story suggests a lot about how theology can be used to justify life-killing situations but more importantly, the inherent dangers of headship theology which grant enormous power and normativity to a male” (Kobo 2018:3). *There is evidence*

²⁸ This refers to the massacre when thirty-four miners were killed by the South African Police Service during a six-week wildcat strike at the Marikana mine on 16 August 2012.

of the justification of gender oppression in many parts of Africa. There is a spirituality borne of patriarchy. The women's prayers say it all.

Kobo (2018:4) continues to discuss the *Limanyano*. This is a structure, a fellowship in the Southern African Uniting Presbyterian Church. It is safe to assume that this was founded to provide a safe haven for the emancipation of both men and women based solely on its name, which represents the desire for unity among Black Africans against colonial oppression. The group began with only men and then expanded to include women. "By space then, one has to keep this history in mind. *Limanyano* created space for black people in the history of land dispossession, cultural killing and erosion of traditional practices" (Kobo 2018:4). A *space* was thus provided for an African way of worship. Some of its features included drumming, dancing, singing, and the celebration of faith. According to Kobo (2018:4), "[*l*]imanyano thus created uncoerced space for African spiritual consciousness". It is clear that the spirit embedded in *Limanyano* is a "cry for life". It is not only a cry for life, but also for resilience, rebellion, and refusal to succumb to powers that continue to oppress Africans (Kobo 2018:4). *Limanyano* has shown to be a powerful space for women where they refuse to be killed by patriarchy.

On Thursdays and Saturdays, married and single people gather for meetings. Only women congregate, in this instance, and they always know exactly what their agenda is. However, occasionally, the pastor and the congregation, which is predominately male, endorse specific programmes. Tension typically arises when a woman assumes a leadership role with men as overseers. According to Kobo (2018:5), "[t]he organizational capacity of a woman is thus subjected to males and unfortunately even in cases where women occupy these decision-making spaces, theirs is often pseudo-agency because they seldom speak for and with their own sisters". Statistics consistently show that, despite being in the majority, women elect men to positions of authority. "We look at the contradictions, when one of their aims and objectives is to empower women 'to play a constructive role in church and society', yet in practice they elect men into power" (Kobo 2018:5). This is related to the difficulty women experience in supporting other women in leadership roles. This suggests that women ironically support patriarchy because of a long history of internalising their social status. This is one of the contradictions one encounters in the struggle for the liberation of women.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of women's prayers feature a *suffering woman*, even though they are granted this *space* in their churches. The designated days are meant to be used for prayer for the church, the community, and the individual; however, instead, the prayers they offer reveal the difficulties and suffering they face. These women's prayers suggest a *pseudo-spiritual* quality

because they discuss their suffering and pain as issues that will be resolved when Jesus Christ returns (Kobo 2018:6). Because nothing is done to stop the violence, this escape aggravates women's suffering. What characterizes pseudo-spirituality? Kobo (2018:6) defines it as follows: "Pseudo-spirituality is the use of spiritual resources such as prayer to evade one's comprehensive life situation, lived experience, by unconsciously expressing commitment to attitude, beliefs and practices that further the interest of the oppressor."

An attempt to free an African woman's spirituality is the *womanised Limanyano* (Kobo 2018:6). A womanised *Limanyano* could become a *Manyano* that tries to refute her experience rather than a *Limanyano* that shares and sobs out her suffering. "So even when they cry and share their pain and suffering, they together map out ways of flourishing here and now ... heaven is too far! ... This is a site marked by consciousness!" (Kobo 2018:6). Women should analyse their structures, agendas, year plans, and programmes, using a womanist framework to determine how these challenge their own oppression and patriarchy. The goal of emancipation is to topple the structures, customs, and power structures that enslave women.

The Scripture must be read and understood in light of the womanised *Limanyano*. This emancipation extends to both men and women. A womanised *Limanyano* should also question the church's patriarchy doctrine. The purpose of this critique is to reveal the ways in which various *religious spaces* are interconnected with oppressive systems in order to pave the way for liberation.

Kobo's work has *important insights*. Her labelling of the spirituality of African women in terms of a "cry" is significant. This can even become a metaphor for understanding the plight and spirituality of African women. The emphasis on prayer is important. Her description of the church fellowship and its contradictions is noteworthy. Her coining of the term "pseudo-spirituality" is innovative. This calls attention to the phenomenon that spirituality could either strengthen or resist patriarchy. Although she does not give precedence to the idea of "agency", her approach corresponds entirely to the sentiments it conveys.

In her reflection on the spirituality of African women, **Njoroge** (2001) makes a basic and incisive contribution. In light of Africa's "propensity for destruction", she started to search for a *metaphor* that could help restore a sense of human dignity and respect for life (Njoroge 2001:67). Instead of a metaphor, Njoroge (2001:68) found a spirituality in the Old Testament story of Rizpah. In 2 Sam 3:6-8, this woman is a concubine, muted and invisible, as object of dispute between two men, Ishbaal and Abner. In 2 Sam 21:9-14, she took action by keeping vigil over her dead sons, protesting senseless killing. Her action moved king David. This woman is invisible, muted, and defiant. She

exemplifies a *spirituality of resistance* and transformation (Njoroge 2001:72). She is both a victim and a historical agent (Njoroge 2001:74). Njoroge links the story of Rizpah with those of the women at the time of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. They all demonstrate compassion and resistance in a spirituality that believes that positive change is possible (Njoroge 2001:80).

Njoroge's focus on an applicable *metaphor* and her description of spirituality in terms of *resistance* are instructive. This short article is a narrative, all about the agency of women.

A book entitled *African women legends and the spirituality of resistance* (2024) on the spirituality of African women is particularly significant. It focuses on the *narratives* of outstanding women and how their spirituality intersected with the struggle for liberation. In the introduction, **Dube** (2024:3-9) describes the context and the central thrust of the essays. The background is the devastating impact of Western colonialism and missionary Christianity. Although traditional African religion was not egalitarian, its construction of gender was different. Something radically changed with the coming of colonialism and Christianity (Dube 2024:4). An attempt was made to erase traditional religion; women were subjected to patriarchal religion and structures; gender was constructed in binary and hierarchical terms. "A male God and his son replaced a more gender and communally inclusive space" (Dube 2024:4). The book is an attempt to redress a neglect by the Circle to delve into the world view of African indigenous religions for knowledge about gender construction and liberation. A number of features of the book, with a large number of stories of outstanding women, are important. The indigenous religions have survived in various forms (for example, hybridised ones), despite the attempt to wipe them out. The words of Mbuya Nehanda from Zimbabwe, who was killed by the colonial powers in 1897, "My bones shall rise", are the guiding direction of the stories. It is an attempt to inhabit her words by being critical of, and resistant to all forms of injustice that reduce the dignity of "earth community" (Dube 2024:9).

Dube's views in the new book are important. The focus on stories of individual women, the retrieval of indigenous religion, the critique of colonialism and missionary Christianity, the sensitivity to the environment, and the emphasis on resistance and on justice clearly map an important trajectory in African women spirituality.

3.5 CONCLUSION – DISTILLATION OF MOTIFS AND INTIMATIONS OF AGENCY AND NARRATIVITY

The literature overview in this chapter highlighted a number of perspectives that can be *distilled* as follows:

- The *resurgence* of African (traditional) spirituality is a phenomenon to acknowledge explicitly. There are multiple *reasons* for this in the literature referred to.
- Traditional *African spirituality* has distinct features: it is *holistic* and integrated and based on a specific dualistic cosmology of the visible and the invisible world.
- Traditional spirituality has a strong *communal* orientation, and practices such as *hospitality* are central.
- There is a belief in a *Supreme being* and *prayers* play a crucial role in this spirituality.
- Belief in a *spiritual realm* could *influence* earthly life; there is a relationship with these entities. Ultimately, this raises the question as to the cause of historical events and occurrence, prosperity and adversity. Younger and more recent African scholars are convinced that this reality could have considerable social implications and contribute to *African renaissance*.
- Traditional spirituality cannot be described without remembering the influence of *Western colonialism*, and apartheid in South Africa, and its radical destabilising and dehumanising impact on African people. The disruptive influence of the West, modernity, and colonialism are crucial elements of the character of African spirituality.
- The role of traditional spirituality to provide *sanity* to African people under colonial conditions is part of the *narrative of agency*.
- In the interaction between Christianity and traditional spirituality, as observed in the AICs, the *nurturing role* should be acknowledged. This connection between coloniality, traditional spirituality, and *agency* is a very important perspective.
- The precise *relationship of African spirituality with Christianity* remains a question and challenge.
- The *efficacy of spirituality* and its *connection to agency* is variously formulated. Spirituality can help people cope with suffering (Kalilombe), bring liberation (Vellem) or work towards African renaissance (Nweke). Spirituality has an immense positive impact on African people and is the golden thread running through the work of all three scholars.
- Womanist spirituality is a fairly *young field of academic study*.
- There is a general perception that the *spiritualities of men and women* can be distinguished.
- A distinction is also made between *womanist and feminist spirituality*, which focuses explicitly on critical theory and notions of oppression and liberation.
- Womanist spirituality encourages *critical awareness, critical analysis, and liberative action*.
- There are practices of *analysis* and *critique* in their methodology. How power dynamics work and how devotional practices keep women in an inferior position should be pointed out.
- There are close links between feminist spirituality and liberation theologies. The focus is on both *praxis* and the *transformation* of the social situation.

- The diverse and unique *experiences* of women is one of the basic points of departure for this spirituality.
- *Motifs* in this discourse include patriarchy, oppression, inclusivity, interdependence, and sisterhood.
- A transformed and redefined understanding of *relationship* of mutuality and reciprocity is central in this spirituality.
- The idea of *safe spaces*, where uniqueness and agency can be celebrated, is often found in the literature.
- The *shift* from *privatised to public* human life should be obvious. There is a critical attitude toward traditional devotional practices that are not gendered and socially resistant.

The explicit use of the *notions of agency and narrative* differs in the work of the four authors. Narrative is not prominently stressed, but the direction of their reflection about women points to the reality expressed by “agency”. Spirituality, with its focus on self-fulfilment and self-realisation, works towards the recognition, support, and strengthening of the agency of women.

- Various emphases transpired in the studies on African womanist spirituality. One connection was highlighted, that between *traditional healing practices* and the well-being of women.
- In the spirituality of women in Africa, *prayers* are very important and most often reveal their intense suffering – their *crying*.
- The younger generation of African woman theologians have a critical attitude about the phenomenon of “*pseudo-spirituality*”; a spirituality trapped in escapism and not focused on protest; in complicity in patriarchy by accepting patriarchal domination.
- *Spaces* such as fellowships accorded to women should be used to raise *consciousness of liberation*.
- The way “*God*” functions in the spirituality of African women is crucial. The *names* given to God allow an insight into their conception of God, and the role God plays in their lives. One should also be sensitive to possible *shifts* that might have taken place in naming God to allow for more liberative trends.
- *Novel emphases* have emerged in recent studies: a new appreciation of the *idea of “circles”*, of the role of traditional/indigenous religion(s), and of typical feminine embodiments. There is a strong focus on *sisterhood*.
- The latest focus on *legendary women*, on stories of *resistance*, and a sensitivity to the *environment* should be registered in any study on the spirituality of women in Africa.
- Various insights have emerged to convey the essence of African womanist spirituality. The focus on agency should not be missed. The idea of “cry”, the reference to Rizpah, the notion of “Talitha

Cum” and of “My bones shall rise” – all convey something of the condition and agency of the women in a most powerful way.

- The centrality of *narratives*, of *justice*, and *resistance* should be clearly discerned.

GENERAL CONCLUSION ABOUT AGENCY AND NARRATIVITY

The key role and function of *story-telling* has become increasingly central and was fulfilled by the work of Oduyoye and the Circle. The extreme importance of this has now been established.

Spirituality has a profound transformative impact. A catalogue of terminology – self-realisation, establishing of identity, empowerment, etc. – could be compiled. They all belong to the domain represented by agency. When this is grasped, it can easily, and without fear of rebuttal, be claimed that the contemporary focus on agency captures, contracts, and signifies all of these diverse expressions. African womanist spirituality is about agency.

The representation of a number of voices has conveyed the vitality of spirituality in its various forms. It also helped to raise questions that could be addressed in the later chapters of this research. Some of the major questions are the following:

- In the Zambian context, and specifically in the context of the Reformed Church in Zambia, is there also the *persistence* and even *renewed presence* of the influence of African (traditional) religion?
- What role does the interaction between the spiritual realm or sphere play with occurrences in the everyday life and spirituality of Reformed women Christians? For example, is there any recognition of ancestors?
- How do Reformed women Christians view God? Do they use specific names for God?
- How would one describe the prayers of Reformed women Christians? Are there specific recurring themes?
- Does the Women’s Fellowship in the Reformed Church in Zambia create a “safe space” for women to tell their stories and express their lived religion?
- Are there elements in the spirituality of women that could, with sensitivity, be labelled as “pseudo-spirituality”, that is a spirituality that affirms patriarchy is only private and does not concern the plight of women and their public lives?
- Finally, and most importantly, what role do stories play? And is the thrust conveyed by agency also present?

CHAPTER 4. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD FOR STUDYING SPIRITUALITY

This chapter examines the new research approach of autoethnography. Attention is paid to issues such as the basic features, the reasons for the interest, and the practice as such. Care was taken to seek research work with an orientation to Africa, women, and spirituality. The chapter points to the exceptional *relevance of this research methodology* to the study of the spirituality of women in Africa, and for the specific focus on narrativity and agency.

4.1 DEFINITION OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a qualitative research and writing approach that aims to provide a thorough analysis of personal experiences, in order to obtain important insights into cultural experiences. The term ‘autoethnography’ refers to an analysis (*graphy*) of personal experience (*auto*), in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:1). The use of this method enables researchers to examine their own lived experiences in the context of more general social and cultural phenomena, thus explaining the complex interactions between individual narratives and the greater cultural context. In other words, it examines how people’s lives and experiences relate to their surroundings, which may include their culture. This method places the individual at the centre of the study of culture. Personal narratives are another name for autoethnography.

It should be noted that autoethnography occasionally takes on *various forms*. Sometimes it can be in the form of a poem, a narrative or a story. Méndez (2013:281) emphasises that “[i]t seems that there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of an autoethnographic account since it is the meaning that is important and not the production of a highly academic text”. Yet, the researcher must be aware of two distinct approaches, namely *evocation*, or emotional autoethnography, and *analytical* autoethnography. Méndez (2013:281) elaborates on this: “Thus, analytic autoethnography is directed towards objective writing and analysis of a particular group, whereas evocative autoethnography aims toward researchers’ introspection on a particular topic to allow readers to make a connection with the researchers’ feelings and experiences.”

Evocation or emotional autoethnography appears to be the *most popular approach*. This method emphasises the importance of *the reader* and their *participation* in the story. It seeks to establish an emotional bond with them and draw them into the story. By fostering empathy and comprehension, it enables the readers to immerse themselves in the narrative. This strategy not only grabs the readers’ interest, but it also has a long-lasting effect on their feelings and ideas. “It seems that

evocative or emotional autoethnography is gaining ground in researchers' practice because of the connection it allows readers to their own lives" (Méndez 2013:281).

4.2 HISTORY OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In the 1980s and 1990s, autoethnography saw a sharp increase in *popularity*. Researchers from academic disciplines such as communication studies, sociology, and anthropology began to use this approach to examine their own identities and experiences. This method allows researchers to include their subjective viewpoints into the research process, departing from the traditional objective and detached stance of conventional ethnography. Scholars who adopted autoethnography were able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the human experience.

The *goal of ethnographic* research is to characterise and evaluate *individual experiences*. Research was found to have many gaps, particularly in the social sciences that deal with facts and truth. Through autoethnography, researchers are able to explore their own experiences and perspectives in more detail. The openness of autoethnography makes it a valuable research method. As a result of this interest, readers are made more aware of topics such as identity and experiences. Autoethnography accommodates *subjectivity and emotionality* (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:2).

Autoethnography has become increasingly popular because traditional methods of doing research seemed constrained, "for the most part, for those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective" (Ellis, Adams & Bachner 2011:3). Autoethnography broadens and expands the method of conducting research, thus creating new opportunities.

4.3 AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

A crucial aspect of autoethnography is that it is an *introspective* study. The *researcher* becomes the focus of the inquiry since s/he is viewed as both *the object and the subject* of the study. The best way to describe this is that the researcher uses his/her own recollections, self-observations, self-reflections, and self-analyses to gather information. This self-inquiry approach is slowly gaining popularity as a research method in social science. Despite the new interest, autoethnography has not been spared from *criticism*. The fact that it focuses on one person, the researcher, raises concerns of credibility. According to Chang (2011:15), "[t]his criticism is rooted in the tradition of social science, which reveres the objectivity of science and wants to guard against subjectivity". Other issues of concern pertain to ethical issues, as there is reliance on personal memory instead of

gathering data. Autoethnography, however, offers easy access to innermost thoughts and private information about the researcher, despite these reservations.

The autoethnographer's life is greatly influenced by his/her *context*. Making the connection between the self and the context has many advantages. Both macro- and micro-cultures are part of the social context. Language, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and other cultural values are considered macro, whereas ethnic/linguistic groups, nearby religious institutions, and interested organisations are considered micro (Chang 2011:16). Autoethnography does not perceive the self in a vacuum but in relation to others, the context. It has thus a "context-conscious orientation" (Chang 2011:16).

As a product, there are two *varieties* of autoethnography. It could be a group effort or an individual one. Even so, the *majority* of autoethnographies published nowadays are the work of a *single author*, a solo act (Chang 2011:18). The process can occasionally take the form of a sequential model, in which the autoethnographer tells his/her story and then passes it along to the next person so that his/her story can be added to the earlier writing, or a continuous model, in which the autoethnographer chooses a topic for data collection.

4.4 FORMS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

There are *various forms* of autoethnography, according to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011:5-7):

Indigenous/native ethnographies. This specific form is developed through the experiences of colonisation and oppression. The people who have gone through these processes are often key players in research projects that seek to question and undermine established power systems.

Narrative ethnographies use stories or narratives to explore and examine the complex aspects of culture. These ethnographies offer an understanding of the cultural beliefs and practices of a specific community or society by using the storytelling technique.

Reflexive, dyadic interviews. In these interviews, the participant and the researcher work together to examine particular subjects or problems. In addition to the participant's narrative, the researcher's own insights and experiences from the interview process are also highlighted. The interviews offer a personal understanding of people's experiences.

Reflexive ethnographies. These centre on the experiences and insights of the researcher while she conducts ethnographic fieldwork. It investigates how the researcher's experiences, biases, and background affect how they conduct his/her research and interpret the findings. Overall, reflexive ethnographies emphasise the importance of the researcher's involvement in shaping the research outcomes, as well as the need for self-reflection and self-awareness during ethnographic research.

Layered accounts. In autoethnography, layered accounts encompass a research approach that incorporates data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature alongside the author's personal experience. By integrating the researcher's own experiences and perspectives with other forms of data and analysis, this method facilitates a better comprehension of the research subject.

Interactive interviews. In the context of autoethnography, interactive interviews refer to cooperative, in-depth research projects involving participants and researchers. The focus is on the interactions that take place during an interview and the personal narratives that each participant brings to the research session.

Community ethnographies. Community autoethnographies are a type of research that examines and demonstrates how a community embodies specific social and cultural issues through the personal experiences of researchers working together.

Co-constructed narratives. Co-constructed narratives border on the relational experiences of people and how they cope with calamities or uncertainties. Each participant in the narrative writes his/her own experience, shares it, and then reacts to the other participant's story during the co-construction process. Through collaboration, the intricacies and dynamics of relationships can be better understood.

Personal narratives. Personal narratives are told by the author him-/herself. They are personal experiences shared in an evocative way. These personal narratives try to connect the story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings.

4.5 ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

There are *advantages* in applying autoethnography as a research method. Autoethnography is accommodative and provides for several approaches. This is the reason why it is a preferred method for research. According to Schmid (2019:269), the reason for choosing autoethnography is that it allows for the examination of personal, *subjective expressions*. It also facilitates the exploration of both identity and diversity. This would usually result in making room for *indigenous* and *marginalised voices*. It could cover a wide range of subjects, including cross-cultural presentations of gender, power or identity. Schmid (2019:269) sums this up: "Hence, autoethnography has particular power when used to amplify the voices in the dark, bring into the foreground stories that have been relegated to the background, and assert standpoints that have been marginalised." It gives research personal accounts that provide a voice: "thus autoethnography represents for many the right to tell their truth as experienced without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood" (Méndez 2013:282).

This approach makes it possible to examine the complexities of human existence in great detail, which leads to a better understanding of our world. Through probing the complexities of their own lives, researchers can explain more general societal issues by revealing the *connections* between *personal experiences* and *collective realities*.

Writing within the framework of autoethnography offers a number of *therapeutic advantages* (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:7). It helps writers reflect on, and make sense of their own lives, by giving them a better understanding of who they are and what they have gone through. People can break free from burdens and question social narratives that prescribe how they should live, by sharing their personal stories. In addition, putting down personal stories can strengthen bonds between people, lessen prejudice, increase awareness, aid in cultural change, and provide a voice for those who might not have felt heard before.

There are also *limitations* to this approach. This kind of research has the power to *stir up feelings* in readers' minds. Through the use of diverse approaches, researchers can elicit emotional reactions from their audience. As such, it is imperative that this type of research be approached with caution. The second issue that frequently arises for researchers is their willingness to share their most private thoughts and feelings. A wide range of feelings and responses can be triggered by being honest and open about it. The act of sharing private ideas and feelings can also lead to criticism and scrutiny from others.

Its emphasis on the self, which has been criticised for being *self-indulgent*, self-centred, introspective, and unique, has drawn some criticism. The *truth* of these personal accounts is a further point of contention. The fact that it is a story or narrative becomes problematic because it may allow for an amount of fiction. It is unclear how much of the narratives offered as autoethnography are the author's inventions and how much of them reflect actual occurrences.

Sometimes, the main source of criticism at this level is the *lack of empirical evidence*. "It is perhaps the closeness of the author to the phenomenon under investigation that causes criticism. If the researcher is supposed to be as distant as possible from the research in order to present as objective a truth as possible, how can this be accomplished by autoethnography?" (Méndez 2013:284). Nevertheless, autoethnographic research is a useful tool in many academic domains, due to the breadth and depth of knowledge that can be discovered through it.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations must be taken into account when doing autoethnography. Autoethnography strongly emphasises the self, which can be problematic. One of the moral dilemmas to be considered

is whether or not to get *consent*, particularly when dealing with delicate matters that could have an impact on loved ones. “Due to this, special consideration has to be taken into account when referring to loved ones, such as family members, partners or close friends” (Méndez 2013:283). One of the most common decisions people have to make when writing an evocative autoethnography is whether to write from *the first or third person*. According to Schmid (2019:272), “in autoethnographic research, the researcher must consciously reflect on, first, [his/her] own participation in the story; secondly, which persons’ voice other than that of the author [is] intentionally or unintentionally reflected in the story; and thirdly, who else may be impacted by the presented narrative.”

It is imperative for researchers to underscore the importance of obtaining consent for the publication of their work. People who share their autoethnographic work with a larger audience not only advance the understanding of the variety of experiences that people have, but also strengthen the bonds and sense of community that exists among researchers. Delving into thoughts and emotions can bring uncomfortable truths and painful memories that may linger even after completion. It is important to approach autoethnography with *sensitivity*. “Writing autoethnographically entails being ethical and honest about events described as well as the content of words expressed by all the people involved in these events.” (Méndez 2013:283). Despite these considerations, the vast majority of authors believe that the main and important criterion is to note that autoethnography is *an ethical practice in itself*.

“Relational ethics” becomes crucial for those undertaking autoethnographic research (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:8). Through their work, autoethnographers not only implicate themselves but also those close to them. This indicates that the people described in the narratives may be affected by the personal experiences shared in autoethnography. For instance, if a son shares a story about his mother, she is included in the story. Similarly, readers can recognise the communities and participants in traditional ethnographies. “We live connected to social networks that include friends and relatives, partners and children, co-workers and students and we work in universities and research facilities” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:7). This ultimately means that sometimes the researcher might find him-/herself implicating others; hence, care must be taken when embarking on this kind of research. In general, relational ethics in autoethnography highlights the necessity for researchers to consider how their *work affects other people* and to negotiate the problems of interpersonal relationships and ethical obligations while conducting research and writing.

4.7 RELIABILITY, VALIDITY, AND GENERALISATION

Questions about reliability, generalisation and validity are obviously important (see Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:9). The narrator's *credibility* is directly related to his/her reliability, making it a crucial component of autoethnography. Based on the available factual evidence, the narrator's reliability could be assessed, by determining whether the events s/he describes are *plausible*. This entails evaluating the narrator's personal experiences critically and figuring out their genuineness. It also calls for considering whether or not the narrator genuinely believes his/her story to be true. Consequently, it is crucial to assess the narrator's credibility and take into account how well the story balances fact and fiction when conducting autoethnographic research.

Validity is a key component of autoethnography that centres on the quest for truth. The main objective is to inspire in readers the belief that the experiences being recounted are real, realistic, and conceivable. An autoethnography's significance lies in its capacity to draw readers into the world of the narrator and enable them to immerse themselves in the story being told. It must be borne in mind that the validity of an autoethnography does not always depend on its alignment with objective reality. The question arises regarding the *usefulness* of the story and the purpose it serves.

Compared to traditional social science research, autoethnography adopts a different approach to *generalisation*. The focus of autoethnography shifts from large random samples of respondents to the readers in terms of generalisation. It depends on how well the autoethnographer can explain unfamiliar cultural processes to the readers. Readers validate the work, by drawing parallels and differences between the story and their own lives.

These issues and difficulties draw attention to how *distinctive* autoethnography is as a synthesis of ethnography and autobiography.

4.8 PRAXIS OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Apart from being a form of critical discourse, it is a *form of praxis*. It follows a specific *process or steps*. Schmid (2019: 269) illustrates how these steps apply. First, the autoethnographer must have a relevant story or incident, in which s/he chooses to reveal the repressed or tabooed story. The researcher then begins to collect autobiographical data that is essential to the research and proceeds to document this information. The documentation also includes the shifts in thoughts, feelings, and insights. This process helps the researcher to identify him-/herself as both researcher and subject. This is followed by an analysis where the researcher uses appropriate, authentic, and persuasive

language. Méndez's (2013:281) words should always be borne in mind: "It seems that there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of an autoethnography."

Autobiographies are characterised by the writing of *past experiences*. Instead of going through the experiences first-hand, the author could interact with *materials* such as photos, journals, and recordings, or conduct interviews with other people. Writing about epiphanies is another feature of autobiographies. Epiphanies are memories that have had a favourable or negative influence on a person's life.

An autobiography needs to be visually *appealing and evocative*, drawing the reader in with the narrative that includes elements such as character, scene, and plot development. It needs to present fresh angles on first-hand experience.

"Showing" is one of the methods employed in evocative autobiographies (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011:4). By *showing*, the author allows the reader to share in the ideas, feelings, and actions of the scene. "Telling" is a writing strategy that works with "showing" and telling a story has become one of the effective ways of communicating information.

Autoethnographers can change *authorial points of view* when writing in the first, second, or third person (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010:5). The first person is used when the reader has either witnessed or experienced the event first-hand. The author is the eyewitness. The use of the second person immerses the readers in the action, allowing them to actively observe, while the third person gives an interactional framework. Therefore, the researcher's aim of using the ethnographic technique is to create a "thick description" of a culture. The intention behind this is to promote cultural awareness and comprehension.

What do autoethnographies *aim to achieve*? What should their objective be? Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011:5) respond to this question: "When researchers write *autoethnographies* they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g. character and plot development), showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice." One of the *crucial aspects* of this movement is the *interplay* between *personal experience and cultural experience*.

The absence of precise guidelines or standards makes evaluating autoethnography challenging. A personal story's difficulty lies in delivering an impartial presentation. A number of general *guidelines* are available to aid in the autoethnography evaluation process. One crucial principle is the "virtue

of accountability”, which holds that researchers should endeavour to convey the truth as though the parties involved are actively paying attention. This idea is regarded as one of the cornerstones of carrying out autoethnographic research. Apart from the *principle of accountability*, the story’s effect on the reader, degree of authenticity, cultural relevance, reflexivity, and substantive contribution can also be considered. By following these guidelines, researchers should make sure that their autoethnographic work is significant.

4.9 AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND AFRICA

African studies, in particular, are gradually becoming more interested in using autoethnography as a research approach. It is important for African studies to reconsider the contributions self-reflection can make to the field. Autoethnography could be useful in African studies. Numerous fields of study have shown how applying autoethnography can generate novel concepts (Mara & Thompson 2022:374). Autoethnographical techniques are relatively new, so it may be useful to refer to some of the more recent applications of autoethnography.

Strikingly, Mara and Thompson (2022) use the method in their article. Katrina Thompson, a European American feminist scholar in Islamic culture, has produced some interesting work. She represents how self-reflection manifests itself in her life. Despite the criticism she has received, she praises herself for her bravery and the advantages this type of research and methodology have given her. “My training has taken me through literary criticism to cultural and media studies, which necessitated learning ethnography methods in the field, first in Zimbabwe and later in Tanzania” (Mara & Thompson 2022:374). Katrina converted to Islam after her marriage to a man from Zanzibar. She addresses the topic of marriage among Swahili women in her writing. During this time, one of her friends pushed her to consider her personal experience in addition to the experiences of the Zanzibari women. This made it easier for her to perceive herself as both an outsider and an insider. “First, I realised they were talking to me not just as a researcher but also as a Muslim woman, as the wife of [a] Swahili man, and, for many of my interlocutors, as a family member, which meant I had a near-insider perspective on what it was like to receive such instruction” (Mara & Thompson 2022:375). This moved her to another level in her role as a lecturer. She introduced a course on literary ethnography, using autoethnography and other methods of creating non-fiction writing to broaden the minds of her students. “Despite their intimate understandings of life on the continent, they are often trained to analyse texts in detached ways rather drawing on their personal experiences and insider knowledge” (Mara & Thompson 2022:375).

Writing is a critical aspect of autoethnography. According to Mara and Thompson (2022:378), writing is an art, and as such, *different approaches* are taken with regard to autoethnography. There are various theories regarding the writing aspect. However, this does not imply that authors should adopt a uniform style. “In fact, we hope for the opposite: autoethnographers should develop their own methods and styles, building on both indigenous and cosmopolitan forms of narrative and other verbal arts” (Mara & Thompson 2022:378). This is particularly relevant in Africa. The need to apply *various techniques* by Africans is the focus for these two authors. Mara and Thompson (2022:379) refer to a South African man: “South African theologian Wilhelm Van Deventer includes evocative descriptions of his interactions with Venda community members as he learned to understand their concept of *vhuthu* (humanity) and its relevance for understanding theology as it is practiced in South Africa, alongside photographs and poetry that illustrates different applications of the concept.” There is a lot of potential, especially with evocative or artistic writing, to reach a wider audience than previously beyond the confines of the traditional disciplines.

A crucial question arises: “Who am I in relation to the research?” The role of the researcher takes centre stage in research. Numerous *positionalities* such as gender, class, geography, and race have an impact on research, particularly those related to Africa. According to Mara and Thompson (2022:381), “[a]utoethnography can help us address our interdisciplinary field’s concerns about identity, positionality, and subjectivity, foregrounding them as central issues in Africanist research”. Key to this methodology is that autoethnography views the researcher as an being an insider or outsider. This type of approach examines the *researcher’s identity* that sometimes changes, due to the nature of the research. This is called shifting positionalities. How is this applied? According to Mara and Thompson (2022:384), “[t]hough some aspects of researchers’ identities may not change, how we enact and understand our identities is contextual – the experiences we bring to our projects, the relationships we form, and the interactions we have while we conduct our research, alongside the identities and expectations that are thrust upon by others”. This shows that our identities will always shape our research. Our experiences in Africa and abroad will change how we view things.

It is interesting to note about autoethnography that it makes us *discover things* of which we were not aware or which we did not consider important. “Autoethnography presents us with opportunities to perform this vital identity work: to come to terms with identities we did not consider important before beginning a given research project; and to stretch the boundaries of what those identities mean in a particular context” (Mara & Thompson 2022:384).

4.9.1 Decolonising scholarship

There are *two primary ways* in which autoethnography can contribute towards achieving the intended goal of decolonisation. Mara and Thompson (2022:386) mention the decolonisation of the text and attending to issues of epistemology. Reducing the use of Western researchers' voices is referred to as textual decolonisation. The primary emphasis is on the experiences of the researcher. Post the 1980s, the *narrator's voice* gained greater attention, meaning, listening to African voices. The feminist movement also recognised the opportunity to decolonise the text and assert their own epistemologies.

The practice of *collaboration* is another tool in the decolonisation of African studies. Collaboration in autoethnography accomplishes something unique. According to Mara and Thompson (2022:387), “[c]ollaborative autoethnography offers us an opportunity to recognise the contributions of others and reflect on our understanding of ‘expertise’ and the researcher’s role”. It is critical to record the contributions made by others to the research, as well as the lessons they have learned and the questions they raised. Co-authors or co-researchers are two examples of the various forms of collaborative autoethnography. Not only does it give *common people a voice* in a given situation, but it also ensures equal distribution of power because we do not have to undergo special training to become better researchers. Mara and Thompson (2022:389) conclude that “collaborative writing does not eliminate power hierarchies in African studies; however, it represents one way of reducing these status differentials”. Collaborative autoethnography helps researchers write stories of justice as well as moving stories of compassion, change or solidarity.

4.9.2 Post-apartheid South Africa and new narratives

This section briefly addresses the use of autoethnography in South Africa (see Schmid 2019). Several factors are related to autoethnography's *emergence* (Schmid 2019:267). First, it differs from traditional ethnography in that the latter describes how an invisible participant would eventually interpret the interactions and behaviours of a specific community. Secondly, this method emphasises how important it is to link the author's *context* and autobiographical introspection to avoid running the risk of encouraging colonisation. It stands for an *alternative narrative* that gives *voice to the oppressed* and lets them speak for themselves. Another factor contributing to the growth of autoethnography is the recording of an *individual's life* narrative without making comparisons to others. Postmodernism and poststructuralism have also contributed since they emphasise reflexivity, which includes personal experiences.

It is important to understand that autoethnography is *relational* and not individualistic. It focuses on the connectivity of stories, how their uniqueness is related to each other. “Autoethnography aims to gather and include the silenced or minor voices without expecting such contributions to conform to one another or to a dominant tone” (Schmid 2019:268). These voices are not commonly heard and not conforming to dominant discourses. It examines issues such as the *notion of power* in a given context and how it could interrupt the dominant discourse.

In the South African context, the use of autoethnography could make way for the creation of *new narratives*. A possible quality of autoethnography is that it makes a case for creating an *indigenous narrative* that offers *counter-discourses* to oppressive and marginalised constructions. South Africa has in many ways experienced oppression and repression and many stories have been buried. South Africa and many other African countries have oral cultures that intersect well with autoethnography. The vast majority of Africans value the telling of stories. The powerful part of this method is its potential to *deconstruct and reconstruct* accounts from the indigenous point of view, as it “serves an essential social justice agenda” (Schmid 2019:275).

4.10 AFRICAN WOMEN AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

4.10.1 A South African example

Mampane (2022) discusses her studies on feminist Pentecostal reflection in the Alexandra township in South Africa. She writes from an African feminist perspective and was personally interested in the topic because she was raised in a church and was well-versed in the Christian charismatic tradition. She raised many questions about what it means to be a woman and about her own identity in the context in which she lives. “I had to know if there might be other women who are made as uncomfortable as I am by some of the Pentecostal discourse that aims to fashion our becoming woman” (Mampane 2022:2). With a few notable exceptions, the majority of researchers studying African Pentecostal charismatic Christianity concentrate on the anthropological perspectives of African attendees rather than the “Americanized mega churches”. She perceived a gap in the literature and believed that this neglected area of research needed to have a voice added. “The stance I take is that of a black woman, already intersectional and bringing to the fore the experiences of Black women from my community” (Mampane 2022:2). Her method leads her to a shared epistemology: “I borrow from all Black woman-centred feminisms the wealth of theory that brings forth my positing for those who, like myself, exist in social and spiritual spaces that give us some of the liberation we yearn for but are still in need of change” (Mampane 2022:3). She became aware of the *importance of narratives*, particularly those pertaining to Black women in research, through

a shared epistemology. The purpose of autoethnography is to *broaden the scope* of scholarly work. Her contribution to the theory of Black women scholars was to include Black Pentecostal women.

She told her story, using *the women* with whom she hung out as a *source of inspiration*. Being a researcher and ethnographer provides access to a variety of responsibility-related questions, including those pertaining to sexualities, pleasure, rights, desire, and *agency*, as well as the responsibility for changing society. In order to help dispel the stereotype perpetuated by the colonial and Western worlds, the story needs to be told in a responsible and ethical manner. Above all, it *affords an opportunity for Africans themselves to share their stories*. “I follow the footsteps and stand on the shoulders of mothers and sisters who have theorised and documented the importance of writing our own stories and worked tirelessly and sometimes thanklessly to hone an epistemological space where my identity as a black woman, native to the community I study, and my role as researcher are not three conflicting identities from which I am compelled to choose” (Mampane 2022:3). She mentions three areas of entry: *native anthropology*, *subjectivity*, and *self-reflexivity*.

She begins by analysing the *sermons* from four particular Pentecostal Charismatic churches in Alexandra, her home town. Male ordained ministers oversaw two of the churches, while female ordained ministers oversaw the other two. Her mother, a pastor, also assisted her. Because everyone knew who she was, she could be trusted, which strengthened her research and helped her gain the respect of even those who were not familiar with her. During her research, areas of identity clashed with her doing research, issues of her being young and a singer. In one of the churches, they insisted that an elder be present during the interview to remove suspicion and temptation by the pastor. “I was prepared for the hitch, knowing that the Charismatic Churches I go to tend to be suspicious of young(er) single women being alone without the supervision of a more experienced and married woman” (Mampane 2022:5). Her positioning as a feminist raised a few questions, especially about the kind of influence she could bring to the women.

She assured the bishops that her presence was not to talk to the women, but to have them *share their experiences* in the church. “I wanted to give them a chance to talk about their lives in the church, how the sermons they listen to affect them and how, when or if they apply what they learn in church elsewhere” (Mampane 2022:5). She used the structures that already existed in the church to speak to the women. Women would be mostly free after church and the convention was that everyone would go for a meal. The food was usually provided. She used this space to interact with the women and *hear their stories*. These interactions added to the knowledge production. The women also identified her as a pastor’s child and that made them comfortable to share with her

their unhappiness and the grievances they had with the church. Her approach back then was to grant interviews, using semi-structured questions that take the lead in the discussion.

The *transcription* of the gathered data is an essential step in the autoethnography process. The writing must align with the methodology and research question. The women's stories were expressed in their native tongue. The way they are written down matters a great deal. They have to be written in Xhosa, Tswana, Zulu, or English, exactly as they were spoken.

4.10.2 An example from Zambia

Shikupilwa's (2018) thesis, *Everyday violence and women's lives in Zambia*, examines gender-based violence. It is *quite relevant* and focuses on women, Zambia, and autoethnography. This is applicable to the focus of this chapter on autoethnography and to *Chapter 1* of this work on the *plight of women*. Her approach to this research method differs from Mampane's who uses interviews. She draws on her upbringing as a female in a strongly patriarchal environment to discuss how those experiences influenced her life and helped her become the person she is at present. The problem of violence in all its manifestations is central to her experience, and she attempts to illustrate how domestic abuse has become accepted in Zambian society, by drawing on her personal story.

According to her, gender inequality starts early because most of the Zambian communities *socialise* women into roles of *subordination*. This explains how the girls start to adapt to their patriarchal upbringing at a young age. As is already evident, women are weaker and more vulnerable in society and culture when they occupy these roles. "Cultural values, the place of women in society, poverty and lack of education and the weakened rule of law all magnify the risk for family violence emanating from cultural societal pressures intersecting with personal vulnerabilities" (Shikupilwa 2018:2). There are many different types of gender-based violence such as sexual, psychological, social, mental, and physical abuse. While there are many different types of violence against women, *wife battering* has been identified as the most common type in Zambia. This form of violence is usually perpetuated by the husband on the wife.

According to the author, the government has made numerous attempts to put an end to this violence by passing the Anti-Gender Violence Act on 15 April 2011. Despite this, gender-based violence is still *on the rise*. Rural communities still hold onto harmful cultural stereotypes such as the idea that it is the norm to beat a wife or to use violence against her. Shikupilwa (2018:4) refers to Mr. Goefrey Mwamba, a well-known minister, as an example. He was cited as saying that beating his wife was a sign of love: "For Mr Mwamba, a mild form of wife beating was acceptable in his culture." The wife who suffered cuts and bruises is still living with him.

According to UN reports, 54% of women in Zambia experience spousal or partner abuse; 43% of married women experience physical or sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands, and 70% of married women stated that their current husband was the perpetrator of the violence. Shikupilwa claims that *domestic violence* is the most common type of violence in the country. The report also emphasised the problems with customary law and how its institutions often marginalise women.

Shikupilwa (2018:12) gives her own experience of how she was *affected* by gender-based violence in her home:

“Our parents fought a great deal, when they were not fighting each other they were beating us up, my mother had this thing where she would beat us for the slightest reasons when we were younger. I considered myself a good daughter but every now and then I’d occasionally get into trouble. Especially over household chores, I hated doing them. Every now and then I’d have to sweep the yard or clean the dishes and I wasn’t always up to it.

One time, I skipped on my chores and was rather unapologetic about it when my mother confronted me. In a few seconds, everything escalated. She was hitting me anyhow and everywhere. She had me on the ground and was kicking and hitting my head with her leg. I thought I was going to die. But no, she was not done with me. Outside the kitchen door were two steps and a slab of concrete surrounding the entrance. She grabbed me by the head and started smashing my head. She smashed my head against the concrete slab, for what I felt like forever. Somebody came to my aid and I don’t remember who it was.”

The author writes that her experience *affected her emotions* negatively. Her experience made her believe that life was not fair.

“My father, on the other hand, only beat us for discipline purposes. He has a style whenever my siblings and I did something wrong, my father would beat us up, most times with a belt and sometimes he would use his hands. After giving us a good beating, he would let us cry it out and afterwards summon us to the living room then ask, ‘why do you think I beat you up?’ and he would expect us to dialogue. That was his wired fashion. And I would never have anything to say back to him, even when I did not understand why or thought I was being treated unfairly. I would keep quiet. I don’t know why I kept quiet. Maybe, because it’s disrespectful to talk back to elders in my tradition. I would just agree everything go faster and cry myself to sleep after.”

Her positioning as a child who grew up in a specific culture and experienced what it means growing up as girl child showed her that she was not going to have it easy. The *violence even spread* to her siblings, she writes (Shikupilwa 2018:15):

“Growing up, I grew up with a vicious tongue and I’m not one to curse around but I had a way of being offensive in my speech when I got upset. So, when my little brother was busy stepping on everyone’s toes that week, I let him know that I would not be having any of his bullshit. He also got mad and told me he would not let me run my mouth either. From there things went up to a ten and he was beating at me. I was twenty-five years old and getting beat up by an eighteen-year-old. Sigh. My mother quickly broke up the fight and I was there screaming on top of my voice that he should sleep with one eye open because I would be scraping his balls off with a razor”.

Her upbringing exposed her to violence and emotional abuse. This resulted in her feeling *traumatised*. The author mentioned that this experience was not only unique to her but that many children experienced trauma as a result of watching their parents fighting. Shikupilwa (2018:9) adds: “Infants and toddlers who witness violence either in their homes or in their community show excessive irritability, immature behaviour, sleep disturbances, emotional distress, fears of being alone, and aggression in toileting and language.” Children begin to *emulate* their parents at an early stage; they begin to role play and later adapt to the socialisation process. This explains why children who grew up witnessing violence tend to emulate their parents and are more likely to engage in violence themselves.

Another factor that contributes to the increasing violence against women is the aspect of Zambian culture that *promotes silence*. Her upbringing in Zambia and familiarity with its culture inspired her to discuss the topic of silence. In her thesis, Shikupilwa (2018:10) mentions the following: “There is this saying which is more of a teaching that whatever happens in marriage should stay behind closed doors, this extends to the abuse that happens as well.” When asked why she put up with the abuse while keeping quiet, her mother gave the rather obvious answer: “What will people think?” Women are viewed differently in society, particularly those who file for divorce; they are perceived as failures or conceited. Women are always held responsible, and even if they were forced to end their marriage, where would they go? Women are less advantaged economically because they are dependent on their partners for financial support. “Deep down in my heart, I knew that even though society frowns on women who seek divorce from their husbands, the real reason she stays is because she has nowhere to [go] and no financial means to sustain herself” (Shikupilwa 2018:11).

As a feminist researcher, Shikupilwa argues the point that, as long as women hold a *lower status* in society compared to men, violence against women will continue. This implies that everything tends to favour men in a society where men predominate in terms of family, politics, and the economy in terms of both quantity and power. The sense of ownership between men and women deprives women of their right to fully participate in public spheres, and violence becomes a tool that men will use to keep women out or subjugate them at all costs. Similar events happen in African marriages, where cultural customs make the woman the object of the marriage rather than a partner. Men are decision makers in the homes. This tends to undermine the position of women: she is simply the receiver and has nothing to offer.

In the years 1870-1900, European countries colonised Africa. Due to the widespread misrepresentation of Africa in European works, this era is still considered historical. The struggle of the *Western world* to conquer Africa resulted in the painting of an inaccurate image of African identity. European authors composed the majority of the written works about Africa. Africans are faced with the challenge of correcting some of the European misrepresentations of Africa, particularly with regard to women. This poses a challenge to Africans themselves. “I personally struggled with the use of data to support my arguments in this thesis because some Western literature on Africa seemed accusatory, but on the other hand, literature by Africans seemed to be a response to Western literature and was on the defensive” (Shikupilwa 2018:16). This then calls for the need for Africans and especially African feminist thinkers to *write their own history* and free themselves from the image made for them by others.

Kinship has always been important in Zambian society. According to Shikupilwa (2018:10), “[k]inship was a significant part of precolonial Africa and continues to be so even today”. In terms of kinship, a hierarchical pattern of power and authority determines how people relate to their parents, siblings, sisters, and elders. For instance, the term ‘father’ refers to the brothers of the father who are entitled to the title. One’s mother’s sisters are included in the term ‘mother’. All of the people referred to as the parents’ children are sisters. The fascinating feature of this kinship is the *dominance that men have over women*. Men have authority over women in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies. This has long been contested, but tradition was the reason. “In the case of a husband and wife, this assumption includes the legitimacy of a husband beating his wife” (Shikupilwa 2018:22). Whatever area of concern regarding kinship, it is very clear that women must show respect to men.

The *extended family* is the other kinship factor. In African culture, extended families play a significant role. Most of the couples do not live alone; instead, they accommodate other relatives, who may be aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, grandparents, or other relatives. “In the past, once a man

marries, his family would organise some children to stay with the couple as a way of measuring if the woman being brought into the family was a 'good hearted' woman" (Shikupilwa 2018:24).

Shikupilwa describes how male dominance predominated in her marriage. Out of respect for their parents, she and her soon-to-be husband were compelled to follow the conventional *customary marriage rites*. Both of them went through the whole process of presenting the bride to the man's family. The *lobola* payment is the most intriguing part of the entire procedure. This custom is shared by numerous tribes in Zambia. *Lobola* is paid in order to formally recognise the relationship between the two individuals who want to get married. The bride's family receives payment in the form of commodities, cash, or animals. It is intended to make up for the suffering the bride's parents endured in raising their daughter and the children she would bear for her husband. There is usually some negotiations regarding the *lobola* to really determine how much the woman is worth (Shikupilwa 2018:35). Even if a couple stay together or have children, they will not be regarded as in-laws if the *lobola* is not paid. If a person manages to avoid paying *lobola*, the parents will demand payment when the wife dies; if not, they will not allow their daughter to be buried. *Lobola* is viewed as a sign of honour but, in contemporary times, *lobola* has been turned into a money-making process, for which some parents charge exuberant prices. "In this context, daughters have become high-priced commodities, where *lobola* has become a means of escaping poverty in a rapidly declining economy." (Shikupilwa 2018:39). This practice that made women to be regarded as commodities also led to violence against women, due to the high prices. This means that, presently, women are regarded as properties with good prices over them. It empowers a man to treat his wife as he feels.

According to Shikupilwa, women have been socialised from an early age to believe that their *bodies* are only fit for men. A woman's life is largely occupied with following the dos and don'ts of society. "Because female sexuality in our culture is associated with dirt, shame, taboo and danger, girls are scared and unsure of their bodies" (Shikupilwa 2018:46). Young girls are instructed to always dress modestly and avoid making sexual advances by donning *chitenje* material. Even when a woman is getting ready for marriage, she is not free in her own body. Men are given hardly any advice and most of the lessons are focused on the woman. Consequently, women are held responsible when marital problems arise.

4.11 AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

A study on spirituality in higher education, carried out by the University of California, Los Angeles, is relevant to this research project. Their findings were that spirituality involves spiritual quest, ecumenical world view, an ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and equanimity, whereas religion

involves qualities and actions such as religious commitment, engagement, conservatism, scepticism, and struggle (Chang 2011:19).

The *methodology* for research on spirituality in higher education was considered. It was suggested that spirituality be added as a subject of scholarship in recognition of the growing interest by faculty and students in spiritual and religious matters. *Autoethnography* was recommended as the research methodology in higher education because it allows researchers to examine the spiritual context of their subjects, which includes their families, their internal and external colleagues, their students, and other communities (Chang 2016:22). The social and the self are interwoven, and a methodical analysis and interpretation takes place between them. This calls for expanding the methodological toolkit for spirituality studies.

In another article, Bilgen (2022:1) discusses how working as an autoethnographer *altered her life*. The process of writing her autoethnographic dissertation had a *spiritual impact* on her. “The more I was immersed in the world of autoethnography, reading it and writing it, the more I began to notice the way that autoethnography itself had the capacity to powerfully illuminate, transform, and connect those who practice it” (Bilgen 2022:1). She acknowledges that living in an autoethnographic world becomes second nature. To put it briefly, she turned it into *a spiritual practice*. What exactly qualifies as a spiritual connection in autoethnography?

Since spiritual experiences are always viewed from various perspectives, there is *no one way* to describe them. Some people attempt to define spirituality through their interactions with nature, others through their experiences in groups, still others use their senses, empirical data, or intuition, still others define spirituality through religious rituals, and so forth. As Bilgen (2022:2) mentions, the experiences include something sensory or perceptually extraordinary; a peak or heightened performance; a sense of wholeness, integration, or cosmic harmony; an abundance of heart qualities; a sense of the sacredness and ecstasy; an experience of connection that moves beyond the normal consciousness of our daily existence, and links us to a mystical sense. All of this alludes to the essence of a spiritual experience. One crucial element is that each person’s spiritual experience is unique. In order to fully comprehend the meaning of a given spiritual experience, *an individual must be examined*.

Upon completion of her autobiographical dissertation, Bilgen dedicated most of her time to documenting life events that have resonated with her and transforming them into a contemplative voyage. “Sometimes I write out meaningful interactions of what was said in a particular workshop word for word, and sometimes in summary form, or in prose, sometimes in rants of confusion, or

exclamations of agreement” (Bilgen 2022:3) Later on, she applied the writing and rewriting as the *method of inquiry* and the principles of creative analytic practice. This process enabled people to consider *autoethnography as a spiritual experience* in more detail. She found that studying anything spiritual, mystical, or transcendental requires experiencing empirical *proofs of oneself*. According to Bilgen (2022:8), autoethnography is both a *research technique* and a *spiritual discipline*.

4.12 CONCLUSION – CRITICAL INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS

This chapter scrutinised a number of research outputs on various aspects of autoethnography. The basic insights include:

- Autoethnography is a fairly *recent* research methodology and is increasingly gaining *popularity*.
- The approach’s focus on experience, reflexivity, social context, cultural dynamics, and social relations makes it *attractive*. It is in a sense a corrective to other supposed “objective” methods.
- The particular advantage and strength of autoethnography is its potential to retrieve *marginalised voices*, to support decolonialising agendas, and to work towards greater epistemic justice.
- The literature clearly shows that there is *no* strict *standardised format*. Approaches to storytelling, as well as the perspective employed and the materials selected to support the narratives can vary and be creative.
- The *requirement for quality* is, however, not ignored. The narratives should be plausible and credible, with an emphasis on accountability.
- The *imperative for ethics* is also present. Particular sensitivity should be displayed when referring to others, and under some circumstances the obtaining of consent could be considered.
- The potential of this approach is that it could generate *novel ideas* and lead to new academic discoveries.
- There is also the possibility that the *researcher* as such *could change* in the process of telling his/her own story.
- The suggestion that this research method could be considered a *spiritual practice* is very promising for the study of spirituality.
- It is clear from the few articles cited that the method is *applicable to Africa and to women*, in cases where there is a history of colonial and gender discrimination.

In conclusion, autoethnography is *exceptionally suitable* for this study on the spirituality of women in Africa, and for the focus on narratives and agency. Some research is available that links autoethnography to Africa, and to the study of spirituality. A combination of autoethnography,

African women, and their spirituality could not be found in the available literature. In this sense, this research could make a scholarly contribution.

The critical questions and issues to be considered for Chapter 5, which tells the personal story of the researcher, include the following:

- The *selected angle* for telling the story.
- The assurance for maintaining *quality*.
- The provision for *ethical sensitivity*.
- The possibility of *personal change*.
- *Adequate attention* to realities of context, culture, relations, and personal experiences.

CHAPTER 5 – THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN

My journey of spirituality has been an intricate one, woven with threads of ancestral wisdom, cultural traditions, and a faith in the Divine. From a young age, I received teachings that would shape my understanding of womanhood, motherhood, and my place in the web of life. As I navigated the complex network of our multicultural nation, with its seventy-two tribes bound by a shared belief in patriarchal structures, I found solace and empowerment in the spiritual practices that honoured the female divine. The Nsenga people's reverence for female deities and the embodiment of female creative power resonated within me, awakening a yearning to explore the depths of my heritage. Through these traditional ceremonies, I gained an understanding of the interconnectedness between fertility, motherhood, and the Divine, laying the foundation for a spirituality that made me appreciate who I am, and an understanding of Christian beliefs.

As I share my spiritual journey, I explore the multiple threads that have woven together my identity as a woman, a minister, and a seeker of truth. From the point of resilience echoed by the women in my community to the challenges faced as the first female reverend in the Reformed Church of Zambia, I share the perspectives that have shaped my understanding of spirituality, empowerment, and the reclamation of my worth.

Through this narrative, I invite the reader to embark with me on a journey of self-discovery, where the boundaries between culture, faith, and personal growth intertwine, revealing the beauty and resilience of a woman's spiritual odyssey.

Grandmother's teaching

I was happy to be born a woman, and I celebrated this event even before I realised how important it was that everyone else was also celebrating my birth at the same time. I grew up with a keen awareness of the expectations society had of me based only on my gender. These expectations mostly focused on the conventional roles of caregiving and domesticity, which were thought to be appropriate for a young girl such as myself. This is a tradition passed down through the ages, and my grandmother taught me the essentials of being a woman. Her visits were not merely routine; they were times set aside to impart in me the traits and abilities she thought were crucial for my upbringing. She made sure to teach me the skills of sewing and embroidery among her many lessons, stressing their importance for my future roles as a wife and mother. She would say "*one day in the future, when you find someone special and decide to settle down, you will make a wonderful wife.*"

She led me through each stitch and pattern, weaving tradition, experience, and wisdom into each one. I remember her loving advice, her reassurance that one of my natural responsibilities as a woman was to provide a safe haven of affection for my family. Her warm, proud words struck a chord within me, imprinting on my impressionable mind the essence of what she believed to be a woman's true calling in life. She was always eager to impart this message, which she embraced: a legacy of womanhood that stood the test of time.

In her teachings, she illuminated not only my role as a woman but, more profoundly, instilled in me a deep reverence for the Almighty. Her words resonated with divine wisdom as she often reminded me that, though society might perceive us as fragile vessels, the Creator had endowed women with immeasurable wisdom and potential. With gentle guidance, she encouraged me to look inward, assuring me that within me lay the sacred treasures God had lovingly placed in my soul.

As I reflected on her teachings, I realized that despite cultural constraints, women possessed an innate understanding of their divine origin and purpose. Her most cherished advice to me was to never neglect the power of prayer, for she believed fervently that the supplications of women held special favour in God's eyes. Quoting Psalms 116, she would often say, "I love the Lord, for He hears my voice and my prayer for mercy."

Through her spiritual mentorship, I came to understand my true identity as a daughter of God and learned to cherish the divine design of my gender. She nurtured in me a profound appreciation for the unique spiritual gifts bestowed upon women by our Heavenly Father.

Growing up as a woman

I was born in Zambia and, as a young girl, I was raised in a multicultural environment of seventy-two tribes, each with its own rich traditions, but all patriarchal. The complex web of a culture enabled me to navigate the patriarchal structures that shaped my interactions and perceptions while taking in the beauty of diverse customs. Lusaka is the largest and capital city of Zambia where the blending of rural and urban elements created a rich and diverse pattern that formed my early experiences. The Soli people were the original inhabitants of the land. Growing up in this dynamic environment, I was exposed to a unique fusion of modernity and tradition, allowing me to appreciate both the progress of the city and the timeless values of my community. The central business town with its towering glass and steel structures reached toward the sky, accommodating international corporations and bustling offices. Just a stone's throw away, however, I encountered a different

world entirely – informal settlements where families lived in modest dwellings constructed from mud bricks and thatched houses, for instance Kamwala township.

My father was my mentor on the path of self-discovery. He was a wise man who bridged the gap between the rural and urban worlds. In addition to bringing me to school, which at the time was not a popular choice to educate a girl child, he made the decision to break the conventional view and provide the best education for his children. I had a lucky vantage point, experiencing both the grounding humility of rural farming life in Kapiliyomba farms and the ambition of my father's enterprises in Lusaka's concrete town. I walked in two worlds, a rich traditional and modern soul, deeply rooted yet free. I discovered the contrast of two vastly different worlds, each of which drew my spirit with equal force. On the one hand, my roots reached into the fertile soil of ancestral traditions, connecting me to a heritage steeped in wisdom and cultural riches.

I learned a great deal about womanhood from the women in my life, including my mother, aunts, and grandmothers. My grandmother belonged to a group of special women who were called "Alangizi". She was well-known in the community and was honoured for her commitment to teaching young girls how to be respectable women. At the same time, she supported women to embrace a higher purpose that went beyond what society expected of them, trusting in their innate ability to fulfil higher callings and make significant contributions to society. Her impact went beyond the village; she held other responsibilities at the church. Her teaching included wearing long dresses, and tending to the needs of husbands, fathers, and sons. I observed their laughter and singing, which gave voice to an inner strength, as they woke up before dawn to work in the fields and prepare meals. My grandmother would say "*Nganda ni mwanakazi*", meaning "a woman is the one who makes a home complete".

I could feel the pressure of expectation mounting as I grew older and entered adolescence. I was surrounded by a society that maintained rigid notions of femininity that were inculcated in me through initiation rituals and ceremonies based on the oral history of our tribe. I learned the fundamentals of what constitutes proper behaviour for a decent woman. This meant taking care of family, prioritising the needs of one's husband, children, and in-laws over personal desires. It was all about self-sacrifice for the good of the family unit, maintaining modest behaviour to uphold family honour, avoiding unkind words, rumours, and actions that could damage one's reputation, wearing modest clothing, staying away from unrelated men, and keeping one's virginity untouched. In terms of male figures, the teaching included respecting one's father, spouse, and sons' wishes, not contradicting men or talking out of turn. The teaching was done by specialised women, who would surround me and sing songs of praises to celebrate womanhood. The time when I was secluded

would be filled with their songs and dances symbolising femininity. Even though I had strong desires to further my education and escape the constraints of domesticity, society frequently discounted these aspirations as unrealistic, without benefit because I was to serve my husband for the rest of my life. During my moments of self-reflection, a burning fire reinforced my belief in my value beyond the boundaries of domesticity. The desire for a deep spiritual connection became stronger within me as I slowly entered my teenage life after years of feeling disconnected from any sense of greater meaning or purpose in my life. I was only 12 years old then and, as time went by, I gained more life experience. This inner longing made me wonder about the purpose of my life and whether God really exists at all in the universe. The peace and beauty of nature enveloped me in warmth and acceptance, even as social structures tried to control and limit my spiritual journey. I was moved by the women in our community's whispers of resilience and ambition, which represented the common struggle for equality and dignity in the face of historical limitations imposed by a society of many tribes. For most of the women in traditional societies, marriage and family were the most common categories of ambitions across all generations. I noticed that most of the young girls were taught to aspire to be the perfect wife and mother above all else. The training focused on attracting a suitable husband and successfully managing a household. There was much focus on being a competent housewife who could take care of the children, cook, weave, and cultivate crops. The importance of marriage and motherhood in defining female identity and aspirations across generations in my traditional society made not getting married and starting a family seem like moral failings and a source of shame. Women's enormous burdens and restrictions were not viewed from the perspective of discrimination or oppression. Rather, women were presented as evidence of the extraordinary strength and tenacity that embodied the very nature of womanhood. The ability of women to persevere through such hardships was upheld as a supreme virtue, to perform seemingly endless tasks, whereas being obedient, respectful, and selfless was viewed as the embodiment of female strength. The sounds of women cheering each other on and supporting one another in Nsenga "*Mkazi Salema! Mkazi nikatundu!*", meaning a woman is strong and never gets tired. With the sound of the pestle striking the mortar providing a beat background, the phrase echoed like an anthem in my ears as they went about their hectic days. Their voices were full of pride and defiance, proclaiming Nyanja women's immense inner strength and resilience. It served as a reminder to everyone that a woman's work never ends, but her determination is unwavering.

Women submitted to such harsh treatment to prove the point that they were strong. But I could not suppress or deny any personal goals I had besides being the perfect wife and mother, in order to maintain ingrained patriarchal values and gender norms. Many people frequently fail to see that every woman has hopes, dreams, and the courage to pursue a future full of happiness and

opportunity. Despite their acknowledgement of oppression and bias, some people continue to follow these expectations out of regard for social norms and honour. Girls had to conform to this moral calling at a young age because they were inherited. My grandmother frequently bemoaned the excessive expectations society placed on women. She once requested that there be a review of some of the lessons taught to the young girls by female church counsellors, among them my grandmother. Even when some women became aware of the discrimination and oppression, the need to fit in and be respected by society created a cycle of conformity. As I heard the women's chant "*Mkazi Salema! Mkazi nikatundu!*", a greater part of me wished for a stronger sense of independence, the power to shape the course of my own life through my own choices and decisions.

Childhood, family, and religious commitment

My childhood was steeped in the traditions and values of the Christian faith. I was born in the late 1970s, right in the heart of Lusaka, to a family that embodied a serious commitment to their spiritual beliefs and service to the church. My parents, Everson Wazanji Malowa and Glory R. Katenda Malowa, were pillars of our local Reformed Church in Zambia congregation. From a young age, I witnessed their dedication to their roles within the church community. My mother held a leadership position in the Cassanova section, guiding and nurturing the spiritual growth of her fellow members with wisdom and grace. Meanwhile, my father commanded great respect as one of the esteemed elders of our church. I can vividly recall observing him during services, his tall frame carrying an air of quiet authority as he oversaw the proceedings with a keen eye and a heart full of respect.

Growing up in a family of ten children, with me being the firstborn, our home was a bustling hub of activity and faith. Christianity was not merely a casual observance but a way of life that permeated every aspect of our existence. My parents instilled in us the importance of living according to biblical principles, and their own actions served as a constant reminder of what it meant to be true servants of God. I remember my father's dedication to his various roles within the church, from serving as a deacon to being appointed as an elder. His commitment knew no bounds, as he took on responsibilities at the presbytery level, including serving as the treasurer and chairperson of the Chelston presbytery audit committee.

One particular memory stands out. My father shared with me the story of how, while working as an accountant at the Zambia Institute of Management Corporation, he played a pivotal role in establishing the Mbala section of the church. His passion for spreading the Word and nurturing communities of faith was truly inspiring.

Christianity was first introduced to me when I was very young. My parents baptised me as a baby; I went to catechism classes, and was confirmed as a full member of the church later on. Every week, we would go to church services and participate in sectional prayers. Preachings about salvation would take place during those services. My father made sure that I showed up at every church programme on time. I was raised to believe that I was a child of God, with unending potential, thanks to the sermons and religious instruction. My spiritual foundation gave me the confidence I needed to withstand the social pressures to accept who I was. That I was meant for a higher purpose drove me forward because of my faith.

Growing up in such an environment decisively shaped my own spiritual journey. I absorbed the values of service, humility, and faith like a sponge, watching in awe as my parents dedicated themselves tirelessly to the church and its mission. The lessons I learned during those formative years have stayed with me throughout my life, guiding my steps and providing a solid foundation upon which to build my own relationship with God. My mother, on the other hand, served as counsellor, women's executive secretary as well as vice chair for the congregational women's fellowship. Such dedication left me inspired as a growing child and influenced my decision to follow Christ.

My spiritual journey was greatly influenced by my parents' commitment to their own faith. I developed a strong spiritual bond with my father through his nightly sermons before bed, which established a routine to which the whole family adhered. During our shift as evening sermon presenters, I was able to reflect on my own beliefs at each opportunity before jumping at the opportunity to share my viewpoint on faith with the assembly. These encounters helped me appreciate how crucial it is to live in accordance with the Lord's teachings. I realised early on that leading a life devoted to the Lord necessitated adopting a specific perspective and upholding spiritual values.

School

During my school days at St. Patrick's Primary School, a Catholic institution where every session began with a prayer, I found myself inspired by the commitment of the Catholic nuns who were not only pursuing their spiritual calling, but also serving the Lord through their devotion to education. Witnessing nuns such as Sister Kachepa, with whom I shared my dreams, living out their purpose while making a tangible impact, filled me with a growing sense that I too was being called to a higher vocation. The nuns' teaching went beyond simply imparting academic knowledge; they instilled in us the fundamental conviction that education is a means to achieve our grandest dreams and

aspirations. The academic curriculum was heavily influenced by spirituality. A significant amount of what we learned came from studying the Bible, worship that provided each pupil with an opportunity to lead the morning devotions. We sang hymns, prayed, and we even had a school choir of which I was a member. We were receiving education that went beyond academic subjects; as spiritual beings, we were receiving holistic instruction.

The message was clear to every pupil that we must envision our lives as greater than what seemed possible at that moment, for with God on our side, nothing is impossible or unattainable. I began to feel my own calling growing stronger by the day.

There was a time when girls were not considered as intelligent as boys. This led many girls to not aspire to great things because it was taken as an established truth. At times, male teachers opined that it was normal for a girl to fail exams, as they were known for that. It could have been different, but some girls would celebrate their final year of school knowing that they were expected to get married. In small groups, I could hear some girls dreaming about marrying a rich man. That was what society promised most of the girls, namely to marry a wealthy man so that they could cook for him and take care of him.

School achievement was not considered valuable in itself; hence, not many people paid attention. However, some of them felt that education was everything. Despite the societal norms and low expectations placed on girls' academic potential, a few recognised the importance of education. There were times when we saw girls disappearing from school class only to be told that they were being married off. I knew that, after completing their elementary education, society expected girls like me to simply get ready for married life. However, I had an unshakable inner motivation to succeed academically. I approached my studies with rigour and focus. I gave up all distractions during those late-night hours to solidify my mastery of every subject by pouring over books. When doubtful voices asked if I could succeed, I turned to the Word of God for encouragement. I decided that I would make my own decisions and would not let anyone make me someone else's property. Fortunately for me, my parents were not overly traditional and agreed with my idea of delaying marriage until it was time.

Initiation rites

My transition to womanhood was profoundly influenced by the revered cultural traditions that surrounded me from a young age. As a Nsenga girl,²⁹ I went through the rites of initiation known as

²⁹ The Nsenga people have a strong tradition and are originally from the eastern part of Zambia. Their cultural legacy is closely linked to a matrilineal system in which women are primarily the source of ancestry and descent, a reflection of

Chinamwali, a transformative rite of passage that taught me invaluable lessons about motherhood, spirituality, and the intricate tapestry of life that lay ahead. I recall the elders gathering me as a young initiate. We sat on the cool earth, heads bowed in a mixture of fear and curiosity, as they began to reveal the secrets that would lead me into womanhood.

Perhaps I should elaborate on the *Chinamwali*, because it is so important.³⁰ For young girls making the transition from adolescence to womanhood, this ceremony, so central in the Nsenga tradition, signifies a meaningful journey. This crucial transition not only marks the girls' growth on the physical and emotional level, but also imparts expectations from society and the cultural wisdom they would need in later life. The girls are given a clear understanding of their place in the community and the importance of maintaining customs. Typically, seclusion can last for up to four months. The girls are not merely shaped by the *Chinamwali*; it is an experience that helps them become members of their community with the knowledge and abilities needed to succeed in their changing social roles. The songs and dances that are performed highlight the roles, values, and behaviours that have shaped women's identities over time, thereby depicting the essence of womanhood. Women who have completed the initiation ceremony are granted the respect and dignity that render them suitable for matrimony. Regardless of their education level, women must go through the initiation, in order to be respected and acknowledged by society. Unfortunately, especially in the eyes of the men in the community, those unfortunate women who fail to make it through this important passage are reduced to the status of mere children or inexperienced individuals.³¹

With each teaching, I gained a better understanding of my gender identity and the role I was meant to play. The elders' words were like seeds planted in my soul, sprouting and blossoming into a distinct perspective based on the fertile soil of our indigenous culture and beliefs. A great sense of esteem and admiration is ingrained through ceremonies and rituals that show appreciation for the sacredness of femininity and the power of reproduction. Those who observe these customs are served as a reminder of the inherent fortitude and resilience that accompany the ability to create and sustain life. In addition to encouraging self-acceptance and self-love, we also advance a culture

the respect shown to them in their society. Their customs, rituals, and traditions are all rooted in a spiritual connection, which shows their respect for the mystical world. The Nsenga incorporate rituals, ceremonies, and practices that honour their spiritual beliefs in every aspect of their daily lives.

³⁰ I consulted some extra sources to write this paragraph of my story. See, for example, Mwanza (2013:119).

³¹ While writing my story and about the importance of the initiation rite, I came across an interesting study by Tembo & Mambwe (2021) on adult women who request to undergo the rite at a late stage. I can mention, by way of an excursion some of their research. They describe the attitudes of society toward these women who have not undergone the initiation ceremony. These women are not only barred from attending women's events and cultural festivals, but they are also regarded as immature and inexperienced. While doing their research, Tembo and Mambwe discovered that some older women have a strong desire to go through the initiation because of the negative experiences they have had with their partners and the community. They seek out initiation as a way to gain respect and acceptance in their community, due to the pressure from society.

of inclusivity and respect for all body types by elevating and appreciating the physical vessel that holds our spirits and allows us to experience the world. By acknowledging the importance of female fertility and reproductive ability, we also recognise the role each person plays in the cycle of creation as well as the interconnectedness of life itself. Consequently, the story changes from one of guilt to one of honour and esteem. However, as I absorbed these ancient wisdoms, I came across aspects that questioned my evolving world view. The expectation that a woman should never confront or speak out against men was one lesson that struck a chord in me while filling me with inner conflict. They taught that remaining silent was an essential component of our culture.

The teachings I received during the rite of passage provided me with a connection to my heritage, a wellspring of strength and resilience that sustained me through even the most difficult challenges. In moments when I felt lost or adrift, I could turn inward and find solace in the ancient knowledge, a reminder of the powerful lineage of women who had walked this path before me. As I continue on my journey, I carry these dualities within me, the respect for tradition intertwined with a yearning for self-expression, the weight of cultural expectations balanced by a desire to forge my own path. It was a constant negotiation, a delicate dance between honouring my roots and embracing the ever-evolving landscape of womanhood and spirituality.

Quest for agency

In order for me to navigate this complicated world as a woman, in-depth self-reflection has been essential in forming my perspective and behaviour ever since I was a young child, the firstborn with many responsibilities. Even though society's limitations frequently undervalued my abilities, I overcame many obstacles because I was driven by a strong desire to make a space for myself in a community that did not always see my potential for success. I continued to prove my value by constantly making an attempt to voice my opinions and display my abilities, even in the face of social norms that often disregarded my observations. I overcame obstacles placed in my path by a society that was reluctant to recognise my agency, all the while maintaining a resolute attitude. Even in the face of doubt and apathy, I worked tirelessly to demonstrate that my voice mattered and that my contributions were important.

Through self-examination, I confronted the ingrained feelings resulting from residing in a community characterised by pervasive sexism and enduring patriarchal principles. I faced emotions of hurt, anguish, and bewilderment brought on by toxic masculinity, exploitation of women, and the unfair opportunities I was subjected to. These encounters motivated me to actively challenge and demolish the ingrained cultural conventions and unjust expectations that women face, as I set out on a path

towards feminist self-realisation. I gained a renewed sense of conviction and purpose through this continuous process of self-examination and growth, which is motivated by a commitment to promoting a positive change and escaping the confines of the past. But resilience is the most important story that my self-reflective journey as a woman has taught me. I have developed a thoughtful narrative of fierce female pride as a result of reflecting on the societal and individual struggles that women have faced and overcome. This female pride is a sense of power, purpose, and self-worth as a woman who defies all attempts to deny my humanity. This journey has shown me that the greatest expression of female strength is the courage to challenge societal norms that limit us, such as the pressure to be submissive and modest, and fearlessly determine our own free existence as independent women.

There were moments when I experienced self-doubt. As I think back on my journey, I realise that negative self-talk and self-doubt can be powerful roadblocks to many of my goals and advancement. Those moments of religious studies gave me an opportunity to shed my mask of self-deprecation and enter the liberating space of positive self-affirmation. I actively began to change how I perceived myself, by cultivating a strong self-image and reshaping my internal narrative. Because of my faith in God, I began to regard myself differently from who I thought I was. It was like prophesying to my inner self. I wrote down words that spoke of who I am. I told myself, "You are special, loved by God. You are not what people say." I could not let society's constrictive ideas about a woman's worth override my theological calling and give up on the opportunity to pursue a career. I, therefore, bravely forged ahead, perhaps for the first time, on my own self-determined path forward, despite the possibility of negative reaction.

My confidence in God served as the cornerstone that enabled me to get over these constricting ideas. Absolutely nothing and no one could prevent me from realising the fullest, purest manifestation of my life's purpose.

I overcame all obstacles and harsh limitations that tried to obstruct my way because I was certain that I was working toward a greater good that was revered by the very foundations of my existence. Every day was a reaffirmation of the holy covenant, a resounding affirmation that came from the bottom of my heart that I was meant to be great in God's service; that knowledge served as the cornerstone that gave me a strong faith and propelled me forward. After graduating from senior secondary school, I declined attractive marriage proposals, in order to pursue a career in theology.

Finding my calling

I was frequently left feeling completely broken and battling constant feelings of inadequacy during the struggle for self-worth. This inner turmoil was a result of the hurtful remarks made by those who vehemently maintained that my efforts as a woman would never yield meaningful results. One particular incident that happened when I was a college student sticks in my mind because of how painful it was. There were only nine students in the theology class and I was the only female. It was difficult because I heard depressing comments that studying theology would not improve my status and that, since I was single at the time, my presence was only motivated by a desire to find a spouse. Some people saw me as marriage material and not as a minister in the pulpit. The gender biases and misconceptions that were pervasive in that academic environment really affected me. It was an exhausting internal battle like I was in a never-ending tug-of-war between adhering to my values and fitting in with what society expected of me. I struggled with feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment, questioning whether I would ever be able to escape the oppressive patriarchal bonds that were suffocating me at every turn. I was labelled for having voiced the demand for recognition and equality.

These derogatory remarks damaged my self-confidence, leading to recurrent episodes of self-doubt. When it came time to show my projects or assignments to my peers, these moments of insecurity afflicted me more intensely; I could not get rid of the persistent feeling that my efforts would be in vain. But despite everything, I managed to cling to a sliver of hope – the conviction that things could get better and that even a tiny voice like mine could matter.

For me, spirituality has become a journey of faith in God, where I choose to put my trust in Him no matter what obstacles come my way. Developing a close and meaningful relationship with God has been a crucial pillar of my life, enabling me to overcome challenges and experience the life-changing power of divine intervention. Realising how closely my success and happiness were related to my faith in God, I came to embrace the idea that trust could always lead to positive change. This journey of faith is about more than simply accepting God as true; it is about actively pursuing a close relationship with him and directing my life in accordance with his will, even in the face of difficulty. In order to achieve genuine spiritual satisfaction, it has been imperative for me to consider my guiding principles, cultivate self-awareness, and set out on an introspective path of self-exploration, in order to establish a stronger bond with my spirituality. My identity, purpose, and existential stance within the complexities of the human experience have become personal questions with which I have wrestled through this introspective process.

Amidst the challenges and internal struggles that confronted me, I found solace and direction in identifying the true sources of my happiness. It was a journey of accepting the unchangeable aspects of my life, such as my gender, which I eventually embraced as a central part of my journey towards happiness. Recognising the boundaries between what I could alter and what I could not, I entrusted the unchangeable to a higher power, seeking divine intervention to bring about unforeseen blessings. Although faced with ambiguous reactions from others, I entrusted my hopes to the Divine, believing that one day clarity and truth would illuminate the perceptions of those around me.

I knew that God had called me to something greater, and this calling became undeniably clear to me during my practicals at the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa (UPCSA). As a student at Justo Mwale Theological College, one of the requirements was to do weekend practical work in a congregation within my denomination. However, due to the stance of the Reformed Church in Zambia against women's ordination, finding a suitable congregation to fulfil this requirement proved challenging. The barriers set by my own denomination made it nearly impossible to engage in the practical work. Six months later, an opportunity finally arose through the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa to accommodate me for weekend duties. The feeling of rejection from a church that had a longstanding history of over a century was indeed disheartening. The Reformed Church in Zambia had an ingrained missionary cultural identity that dated back to the country's independence era. This cultural identity, shaped by a hierarchical world view, was adamantly preserved, making it difficult for any form of change or challenge to be accepted within the system. The church seemed intent on upholding the legacy of its missionary past, mirroring the ideologies of its predecessors and maintaining a *status quo* that viewed deviation as being misguided and in need of correction. My ancestors' culture had a long history of upholding more egalitarian customs that recognised women and gave them a high social status and significant decision-making power. Due to the frequent criticism and deliberate undermining of women's independence, women grew accustomed to relying exclusively on their husbands as the patriarchal figures of provision and authority. Women served as shamans, spiritual leaders, and healers who expertly lead their people through rites and ceremonies. Missionaries from other cultures treated these holy customs with contempt and called them pagan superstitions. These missionaries' limited viewpoint led them to not only misinterpret the importance of women's spiritual authority, but also attempt to completely destroy and undermine it.

This commitment to tradition and hierarchy created an environment where dissenting voices were suppressed, leaving hardly any room for progressive adaptation or inclusivity. However, through the opportunities provided by the UPCSA, such as allowing me to preach at various occasions even while

I was a student at Justo Mwale, they wholeheartedly embraced and recognised my potential. Referred to as “*Balisya*”, which means our great leader, our pastor, the reverend, they bestowed upon me a sense of respect and belonging that transcended mere academic training. Their support and honour treated me not as a student in training, but as a full-fledged minister in my own right. I firmly believe that, had I not undergone my practical training in the UPCSA, my true calling might have remained unfulfilled. Their mentorship and guidance were instrumental in affirming my path, to the extent that, even after my graduation, I continued to be actively involved in their programmes, imparting knowledge and preaching with zeal and dedication. Through their nurturing environment, I was able to flourish and evolve into the minister I am at present, forever grateful for their role in shaping my spiritual journey.

I felt a strong sense of God’s comforting presence filling my life and a sense of hope that strengthened my resolve to keep going. What really made me unique were my passion and hope for serving God. Being led by God’s divine plan gave me a sense of security and comfort, even in the most trying times, acting as a comfort and a source of restoration when things were bad. To some extent that also provided healing for me.

In my own experience, I faced resistance from some relatives who were strongly against my decision, even though my parents were firm in their support. It became a struggle to convince them that I was genuinely called to the ministry and that I could break down gender norms to defy social conventions. Others mocked me for even trying, saying that being a pastor was simply a joke and a pointless endeavour that would end in failure. Even as I firmly adhered to my conviction, I struggled with extreme loneliness and isolation. In those moments when I felt discouraged by the criticisms of other relatives, my parents’ strong faith in me gave me strength. Their endorsement and support strengthened the validation of my chosen path. I was aware that, contrary to outdated gender stereotypes, my parents recognised my potential and ability. I was able to persevere in spite of others’ doubts because of their support. Similar to how the Lord told Samuel, “He will show you what you shall do”, a strong voice in me persisted in speaking, a clear calling that I was meant for this holy work (1 Samuel 16:3). Similar to Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, where he was called to be an apostle (Acts 9:1-19), I was filled with a steadfast conviction that this was the right decision and the path I was meant to follow. My decision was unwavering because of that inner knowing; I would follow this path of serving God regardless of the challenges, paying attention to the verse, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Since “there is neither ... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”, I was meant to take up my position

as a female leader in religious ministry, I paid close attention to the voice of my soul, which repeatedly affirmed this (Galatians 3:28).

Despite the resistance I encountered, I never wavered in my conviction that, regardless of my gender, I was destined to perform the role of spiritual guide. With determination, my desire to become a reverend originated from my commitment to serve God, despite being shunned by others. I made a tough decision that would ultimately set a strong example for others to follow. I took the opportunity to actively challenge the patriarchal norms and gender restrictions that had long hindered women by boldly claiming my role as a reverend in a world dominated by men. I was driven on this path by a desire for agency, and I remained steadfast in my resolve to dismantle obstacles and clear the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

God's presence enveloped me, reminding me that I was following the path laid out for me, defying society's narrow definition of acceptable behaviour. Every independent decision I made, every step I took toward embracing my ministerial calling, I felt a surge of empowerment rushing through my veins. I resisted the pressure to conform and give up on my dreams in favour of others' expectations. For I knew, deep within my being, that God had given me the strength and fortitude to resist anything that did not align with his divine plan. With the confidence that I was not alone, I continued forward as a lone figure negotiating the difficult path of ministry.

Academic studies

I always knew that studying theology in a male-dominated world would not be easy. When I applied for ministry, I had high expectations. I was looking forward to a training that would equip me to serve as a female minister. However, much of the subject matter was dominated by male theological ideologies. This was the experience in my classroom, a persistence of androcentric disciplines. Too often, the curricula presented to me centred exclusively on male writers, philosophers, and historical figures, crafting a male-centric narrative that renders women's voices and perspectives peripheral at best. Theological language and symbolism have often been dominated by masculine terminology and imagery, such as referring to God using exclusively male pronouns, for instance. It was one thing to have a few women studying theology, but it was another thing to face the male ideologies and approaches in class. It was clear that much attention was paid to the way in which they viewed theology, and I struggled with myself to change the pattern of belief and conviction.

The majority of theological teachings, training, and interpretations of texts have often been shaped by a male-centric perspective, viewing God through a masculine lens. This perspective prioritises male experiences, narratives, and authority. The argument was always that some people interpreted

certain biblical passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12 (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man”) as forbidding me from positions of leadership and teaching in the church. I have been subjected to discrimination as a result of this interpretation. These ideas have helped perpetuate the notion that I am somehow less worthy of the calling or capable than men. In a similar vein, the Genesis creation narrative has been invoked to defend my subjugation under men. The notion that I was intended to serve as a man’s subordinate helper was used to defend discrimination against me and gender inequality. Rather than being viewed as an equal partner in creation, I was reduced to roles of support and subservience. This view made it challenging for me to carve out my own space and perspective in the field. While in class, I observed that women’s contributions to this field were not adequately acknowledged or represented. Female voices were usually marginalised or ignored in the curriculum, which frequently emphasised the work of male scholars and religious figures.

My male classmates were sceptical of feminist theology, a module I was looking forward to, calling it simply an attempt to defend my position in this traditionally male field. The significance of this discipline was lost on them, as it was a crucial instrument for revealing and correcting the underlying injustices and biases that permeated mainstream theological thought. Throughout the lectures, I was taken to a world of critical analysis where long-silenced or marginalised women scholars’ and thinkers’ voices were at last afforded the opportunity to be heard. By dissecting the patriarchal interpretations that had moulded our perception of holy books and customs, each lecture questioned the *status quo*. The module helped me understand gender and spirituality better and motivated me to actively work toward everyone being respected and valued. It was a transformative experience. I listened inwardly to the quiet little voice that confirmed my gifts of insight, leadership, and wisdom as holy sparks that needed to be kindled when negative interpretations of verses such as 1 Timothy 2:12 threatened to silence me. I refused to believe the stories of oppression; instead, I found myself mirrored in the bravery of spiritual mothers such as Deborah, Huldah, and Priscilla, who defied patriarchal standards. After studying these women’s teachings in more detail, I discovered a rich history of emancipation and empowerment that is frequently disregarded or forgotten. They remind us through their stories that feminism and faith are not mutually exclusive; they are rather woven together into stories of resilience and resistance.

Upon completion of my theological training in 2000, the Reformed church in Zambia sent me to Chitoola congregation where I was ordained on 7 January 2001. It was their procedure that, at the end of one’s studies, one was called to meet the leaders of the church for admonition. One representative would be chosen to be able to speak on behalf of other fellow ministers and issue a

word of encouragement. This was the moment I had been waiting for as this was the first time I was meeting the leadership of the church. His message to me could only be summed up in a sentence, “Go and prove yourself”. *“Ichi ndicho munalu funa ndipo takulolani stopano pitani mukazionele nokha kaya ngati muzakwanitsa koma muzafunika mukaoneste kukwanista kwake”* (This is what you wanted and we have allowed you; so go and prove yourself). I had to choose how to handle these situations; either to be aggressive, or to respond calmly with love. I decided not to be aggressive. Some did not know what to say.

The message of my ordination as the first female minister had gone viral. The local radio station began to announce that the Reformed Church in Zambia was to make history. After the announcement of my ordination and my official ordination, some felt that the church had lost direction. *“Mpingo wataika ndiponso ndiye kutha kwa mpingo wathu”* (The church has lost direction and there is no vision for the future). Such comments made me realise how serious the problem of patriarchy is. I was given many names for having made such a decision, names such as rebel, stubborn, difficult, and arrogant. They thought that only men should ascend to a position of authority. Women like myself were considered to be overstepping the boundaries of the church. Ministry was a male domain. Having a woman as a minister in the church was taboo. Despite facing numerous challenges, I was determined to forge ahead. Besides, it was well-known that I was being gauged by society’s yardstick to the extent that two things had to happen. Either I fail or I succeed. The desire to move on was motivated by the fact that I was the pioneer. I knew that my failure to do the work could have meant failing other women and consequently closing the doors for their future success. I had to work much harder than men. In order to prove my worth, I had to learn how to ride a bicycle, walk long distances, and show more ability than the men. My success had to be earned through pain and trial. I became a litmus paper to which everyone was looking up, trying to check if I would not resign.

I have always encountered difficulties and roadblocks in my quest for approval and acknowledgment. As a pastor, I was to put in twice the effort to dispel gender bias in a culture where male leadership in religious institutions has historically dominated. They are always trying to go above and beyond and show off their extraordinary talents.

Cultural traditions and marriage expectations

In a society dominated by patriarchal norms, women striving to achieve their higher aspirations are often unfairly labelled as stubborn and not considered genuine women. The underlying fear ingrained in this mindset is that women who attain a high level of education may struggle to find a

suitable partner, as men may feel threatened by their intelligence. This prevailing attitude has continually served to remind me of the perceived dichotomy between femininity and education, as if one's pursuit of knowledge could compromise one's identity as a woman in the eyes of society. There were moments in my life when I truly believed this notion, particularly during the period when I delayed getting married until my late thirties. As my peers were joyfully experiencing the arrival of their grandchildren, I finally tied the knot. I became a bad reference point where people would whisper to each other "She will never find any luck in finding a partner.". Sadly, society perceived me as too advanced in age, deeming my chances of a successful pregnancy to be virtually impossible. One woman told me that I should forget marriage or ever having children, "*mwakalamba lombe*" (you are too old for marriage now). The distressing reality that a woman approaching forty could be viewed as too old for marriage brought about an acute sense of humiliation. It was disheartening to face the unfair judgment that a woman of my age should no longer pursue the cherished institution of marriage. At a certain juncture during my time at college, I found myself in the position of being viewed as a prime example of societal norms that discouraged women from entering male-dominated professions by insinuating that it could hinder their chances of finding a spouse. A prevalent perception among parents was that daughters opting for vocations such as the ministry of Word and sacrament might end up unmarried, due to their career choice. This may help explain why the number of female applicants at Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, where I studied theology, has remained consistently low up to this point. The historical underrepresentation of women at Justo Mwale University and other higher education establishments serves as a reminder of the persistent influence of ingrained prejudices and stereotypes on enrolment trends and educational opportunities.

Experiences as the first female minister to be ordained

As a female pastor, I frequently found myself travelling a path of acceptance that was paved with doubt and scepticism. I had to continually demonstrate my worth, in order to win the acknowledgement and confidence of my peers and congregations. For me as female pastor, every Sunday was like going into a combat zone or to a battleground. Doubts surrounded me like dense fog as I made my way to the pulpit, the weight of scrutiny and scepticism bearing down heavily on me. Some members of the congregation's expressions said volumes; their eyes downcast and sideways glances revealed a silent but noticeable opposition to the notion of a woman taking on the role of preacher. With each sermon, it was as if I had to break through the very core of their doubt. It became clear that my sermons required not only steadfast belief, but also a thoroughness of study that allowed no room for ambiguity or inaccuracy. Even the smallest change in tone could be

interpreted as a sign of weakness that would undermine the credibility and experience I was trying to establish. By contrast, it was clear that my male colleagues were easily respected simply because of their gender – a privilege that I was unable to achieve. Consequently, I began to assume the mannerisms of an austere judge presiding over a courtroom, eschewing any visible signs of femininity and projecting authority into every word I uttered, as though announcing an unchangeable decree. I kept a serious expression the entire time, expressing the importance of the situation and the seriousness of what I was saying. I exuded a sense of resolve and seriousness that attracted notice and earned respect. There were times when I worried that my voice sounded like a lion's roar, but amazingly, people around me did not flee in terror; instead, they exhibited an amazing degree of tolerance and understanding towards my intense expressions. I lived to believe that was how I was to project myself as minister and carried myself in all the congregations I served.

Minister as image of God

The chief made great efforts to make sure that word of my first arrival was spread throughout the village. He informed everyone in the village by sending his reliable messenger out. A message of amazement and wonder at God's work was sent, inviting everyone to see for themselves the miraculous acts that had taken place. Considering that the village had never before welcomed a female minister, whom they revered as God's messenger, they were all very excited about my arrival. Preachers have always been viewed as the image of God's divine presence among people, a legacy that has influenced how people view them in society. Therefore, I had to be extremely careful in every interaction, aware that any mistake on my part might unintentionally warp the image of God, for which I stood, to the villagers. The community regarded my deeds as reflecting not only my own personality, but also my ability to shape their perception of God and His message. As a result, my actions carried deeper spiritual significance that affected how the village understood and assimilated heavenly lessons, going beyond simple personal accountability. It was a heavy duty that required me to constantly be conscious of my actions and the consequences they would have as I walked the fine line between being a humble servant of God and a shining example of His light to those who looked up to me for direction and spiritual fulfilment.

According to Chieftainess Njanje and Chief Mwape, it was indeed a humbling experience filled with gratitude for the blessing that had come upon their land. They both felt driven to convey to their people the significant influence of my arrival. The words spoken were not merely meaningless statements; rather, they were sincere reflections of the moment's significance. For them, I was not simply a clergywoman; I was a living emblem, a link between realms, entrusted with fostering the

spiritual development of an entire community. This made me realise how much weight was on my shoulders as God's ambassador on earth. I became fully involved in the spiritual life of the community in the ensuing days. Every sermon I gave was an act of transmitting divine wisdom, not simply words. I saw understanding light up people's faces as I spoke about grace, forgiveness, and compassion – as if a curtain had been lifted. The work I carried out acquired a sacred quality. Every action, no matter how big or small, served as a channel for the community to experience God. People's faith was evident as they approached these moments with trembling hands and hopeful hearts. However, I realised the full significance of my work during the quiet pastoral care moments. Whether I was sitting with a bereaved widow, offering guidance to a troubled youth, or simply listening to an elderly member's concerns, these personal interactions made me acutely aware of how I was a vessel for God's love and direction. Weeks passed, and I noticed a shift in the village. There seemed to be a general reverence for the mysteries of existence that I had contributed to solving, as well as for me. Conversations among the villagers increasingly turned to matters of faith and the search for deeper meaning.

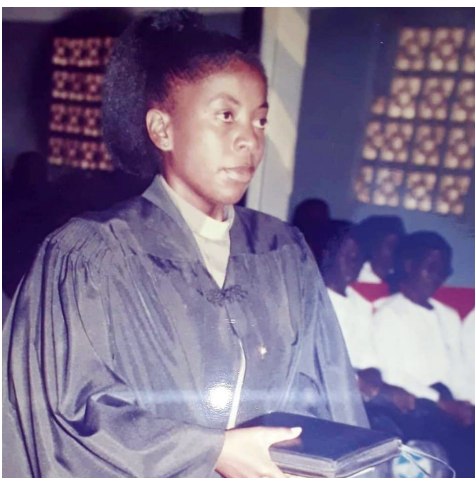
Challenges in the ministry

Some people continued to believe that women were not meant to be leaders in the ministry, despite my passionate commitment to the ministry and my emphasis on gender equality during presentations. One specific incident that stands out in my memory is when I was preaching from 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul talks about the various spiritual gifts that have been given to us. I made an effort to share with the congregation the idea that all people are equal before God, regardless of gender. But soon after the service ended, a man came up to me and said, in a condescending tone, "You've made some valid arguments, my Reverend, but the idea of a woman being my spiritual guide is something I will never accept." These words pierced deep within me, serving as a stark reminder that, despite my calling, there would always be individuals whose prejudice would tarnish their perception of my role as a spiritual leader.

Rural and urban congregations

My journey through the Reformed Church of Zambia's calling system has been incredibly enlightening. I will be honest; I was nervous when I was first assigned to be a minister in an Eastern Province village. The thought of serving a small village community seemed foreign and intimidating to one who had grown up in the city. But I was able to appreciate the beauty of simplicity and the connections to the community that the rural setting offered by stepping outside of my comfort zone.

The Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) has a two-way calling system. The first one is where the congregation decides to call one to be their minister, and the second one is where the leadership of the church decides where to take one. There is no maximum number of years one can stay at the congregation before moving to another station. At the same time, different congregations carry with them different status. What determines such status is the financial position of a particular congregation. The RCZ recognises three categories of what can be said in terms of status, namely urban, peri-urban, and rural. The vast majority of people prefer to serve in the urban area where life is advanced and some congregations maintain a high status; the least being rural congregations where money is seasonal. As I made the long move from Lusaka, passing through the dusty rural roads, I could not help but wonder what awaited me. Would I be able to connect with a congregation so different from my urban upbringing? Could I adapt to a life where financial resources are scarce and inconsistent? These questions lingered in my mind, igniting a mix of excitement and nervousness that fuelled my determination to make a positive impact. The most powerful verse that gave me hope and strength was Joshua 1:4-9, where God assured Joshua of his constant presence in his life. This was so profound. And the beautiful hymn 11, "*Paphiri ndi padambo ponsepo pali Mulungu*", simply affirming that God's presence is everywhere, and so as one walks, s/he must realise that they are not alone, but that God is there. Finding comfort in the Bible's assurance of God's support and direction is a timeless treasure. This firm promise gave me a solid base upon which to walk through the highs and lows of life. God's omnipresence is affirmed in the hymns that serve as a constant reminder of his love and support. These timeless words of wisdom provided consolation and inspiration to me to look to God for direction.



Arriving at the village, I was greeted by warm smiles and welcoming gestures from the locals. Their genuine hospitality quickly dissolved any doubts I had, paving the way for meaningful interactions and shared values to transcend cultural differences. Upon my arrival, the congregation was waiting, and immediately after settling into my new house, they prayed, committing my stay into God's

hands. They were appreciative of what God had done for them by providing a minister, and not simply any minister, but a female minister. In this, the people recognised a spirituality of nurturing. For them, having a female minister was akin to having a mother in their midst. As a way of addressing me, they would sometimes call me “Mother” or “Father”. To them, God was a parent representing both male and female qualities. It was interesting to hear the villagers identifying me with a nurturing, mothering God, as if they were aware that God cannot be seen solely in male terms but also through a female figure.

Later on, they proceeded to orient me about their beliefs. Apart from believing in God, they also believed in the existence of evil spirits operating in the village. There was a recognition of both good and bad in the spiritual realm, which was an integral part of their belief system. They explained that the spiritual realm encompassed not only the Divine but also malevolent forces that needed to be addressed and protected against. Through their explanations, I gained insight into the community's holistic world view, where the physical and spiritual realms were intricately intertwined. Their spirituality encompassed a nurturing, parental deity while acknowledging the presence of both benevolent and malignant supernatural entities. This duality reflected their understanding of the complexities of the unseen world and the need for spiritual guidance and protection.

I was informed that there was a belief in demonic spirits that were out “to get people”. I had to be careful and attentive as a result. Their belief in an all-powerful, guardian Spirit coexisted with this idea of malevolent supernatural forces. The villagers believed in a twofold spiritual universe that was governed by both good and evil forces. This belief system reflected a holistic understanding of the world that went beyond the purely physical and could be viewed as a manifestation of their cultural and historical experiences. Their spiritual traditions offered a framework for understanding and dealing with the different forces which, they felt, influenced their lives, helping them navigate the complexities of existence. I strengthened my resolve at times like these by clinging to my strong trust in God’s protection. I was comforted by the conviction that the all-powerful, who rules over everything, would never allow harm to come to me. I turned to fervent prayer and fasting with a brave heart, asking God to provide an unbreakable barrier of holy defence. My heart became stronger against any trace of doubt or fear with every prayer. An endless supply of holy courage strengthened me.

In my 23 years of service, I served in 7 congregations and of these, only 2 were able to pay my salary at the end of the month. It always caught my attention that women like myself were sent to congregations that were considered weak or unable to sustain a minister. On one occasion, a church elder approached me with an apologetic tone. “Reverend, I must be upfront – our funds are scarce.

We may not always be able to provide your full salary.” Though disheartening, his words did not shake my resolve. I knew in my heart that I had been called to the place for a purpose greater than monetary gain.

In the months that followed, true to the elder’s warning, my salary became sporadic at best. There were times when I would anxiously await the end of the month, only to be met with empty promises and regretful messages. Yet, even in those moments of financial uncertainty, I found strength in my faith. I recall a very difficult time when the church had no more funds. I knelt before the Lord in earnest prayer, my heart heavy, my burdens laid before Him. “God, please sustain me; I am merely a humble servant trying to carry out Your will.” The next Sunday, as I was getting ready to preach, a family came up to me holding a bag of maize and a small bundle of cash, their savings, which they offered as a gift of sacrifice to support me. In times like these, when inspiration softly pushes my soul, I am reminded that wealth is more than merely material possessions. Indeed, the source of strength and guidance exists not only externally, but also within the depths of one’s own faith. Reflecting on a specific moment, a sense of overwhelming gratitude enveloped me, illuminating an important lesson about God’s limitless provision. It was more than simply a feeling; it was a realisation that, when we express gratitude, we acknowledge not only the blessings we have received, but also the divine grace that guides our lives. This experience served as a reminder that, as we journey through life, our faith acts as a compass, guiding us to the limitless reservoir of God’s love and care. At that moment, amidst the whirlwind of emotions, I found solace in my faith.

Whenever transfers were made, only men were considered for large congregations with high status. Surprisingly, even members of such congregations preferred men to women. Despite being sent to congregations without a salary, I was able to persevere, having my trust in the one who had called me. Whenever I called upon the name of God, drastic changes would take place. I was determined that, wherever I served, God would see me through. God calls us all. No one is excluded from the blessings of the Lord. We have the same grace. On one particular day, I asked the congregation to meet for an extraordinary meeting that allowed all stakeholders to be present. We discussed how best we could make changes to the congregation if we needed to increase our income. So many suggestions came forth, and all were meant to grow the congregation. One suggestion came from a member who proposed that we request land from the chief and do farming. That request was granted and, in that year, by combining our efforts, we managed to harvest over 300 bags of 50kg maize. There is always an opportunity everywhere. Having faith in God to make a way where there seemed to be no way opened doors to a bountiful harvest. The congregation, who owed me money at that time, was able not only to pay me, but also to clear the debt. I acted out of faith to start

farming to make a difference. I can, therefore, repeat the song *Paphiri ndi padamoboponsepo pali Mulungu*. Indeed, God is present everywhere and guiding us.

The many sceptics' doubts were evident whenever I was assigned to serve a rural or peri-urban congregation. "She'll never last", they would whisper, eyes narrowed with condescension. In their minds, my gender automatically disqualified me from succeeding in such challenging environments. But I was determined to prove them wrong. My profession was not inspired by the whisperings of critics who were rooted in patriarchal prejudice. It came from a place of intense spiritual agency, a firm inner conviction that, gender be damned, I was meant for this holy work. No one could give me or take away my self-determination to embrace my purpose, just as Mary resolutely responded to her call with the self-determining words "I am the Lord's servant." I was prepared to influence where I was sent, just as Isaiah responded, "Here I am, o Lord, send me." I had faith in my ability to succeed. I continued forward, strengthened by the conviction that I was the creator of my own spiritual journey, even as they laughed. I refused to let their doubts mask the voice of God speaking to me in my spirit, as clear and loud as the burning bush calling Moses to come. The spiritual agency, not their approval, made me worthy. I discovered how to develop a strong internal sense of purpose. I worked as if there were no tomorrows and stood to preach like the messenger of God.

I can still picture the curious stares that greeted me on my first Sunday at a small village church in the heartlands. Week after week, I poured my heart into my sermons, counselling, and outreach efforts. I organised community initiatives, visited the sick and elderly, and strived to be a beacon of hope amidst the harsh realities of rural life. Slowly but surely, the congregants' doubts gave way to admiration and trust. Every week, I was ready to deliver the sermon, drawing from my own spiritual agency rather than following any institution's predetermined script. I prayed to God, seeking strength and direction by connecting with the Divine directly, without the interference of patriarchal ideologies, through my own direct spiritual intuition. This helped build trust in the lord. The work needs God's guidance and one's own thinking. A minister's work included outreach and visiting the sick, two things I really enjoyed doing as a way to express my calling to follow my own path. As I determinedly forged out my own path as a minister, rather than bowing to those who attempted to limit my role, house-to-house visits helped me reach out to many people, including non-churchgoers. Sometimes I had to travel long distances to administer Holy Communion. One day when we arrived at the remote section of Mwape, little did we know that we would be welcomed by a herd of elephants that had strayed near the church grounds. It was a sight to see, but also a moment of fear and uncertainty for all of us present. In that moment of fear, I turned to my faith

and called upon the name of the Lord for protection and guidance. The congregation stood still, holding their breath as the majestic creatures surrounded us.

It was a test of our faith, but also a moment that brought us closer together in prayer and trust in God. We held on to each other, with silent prayers on our lips, hoping for a miracle to unfold before our eyes. And just like that, as silently as they had arrived, the elephants passed through our area, walking gracefully through the church grounds, and eventually disappearing into the wilderness. It was a moment of awe and wonder, a moment where we all felt the presence of God surrounding us with his protection and love. As we resumed the Holy Communion service, there was a sense of gratitude and reverence in the air. We had witnessed a miracle, a moment where faith had prevailed over fear, and where the divine presence had guided us through a moment of uncertainty. The memory of that day would forever remain etched in my heart, a testament to the power of faith and the miracles that can unfold when I place my trust in God.

Despite their sermons about how God had not given us all the same gifts, I refused to believe the demeaning stories told by the sceptics around me. Although it is true that we were all given special talents, those distinctions were never intended to hold us back. I had seen male ministers elevated time and again to lead large congregations, while the institutional hierarchies remained blind to my equal spiritual gifts. Although opportunities to serve in large congregations were rarely extended to me, due to my gender, I remained resolute and never gave up. With the fire of determination burning in my soul, I pressed forward undeterred. In 2012, I was elected to serve as the synod vice secretary. This pivotal achievement was the result of my own resilience. I believed that they saw how much I was dedicated to work when given assignments. I had also worked in that capacity previously at presbytery level. I went on to be elected to a seat on the university board, refuting the institutionalised biases that aimed to erect barriers on my path in the past.

Not content to stop there, I carried my journey to the very heart of the Council of Churches in Zambia itself, securing a board membership. With each barrier I demolished through sheer determination, I emerged emboldened to keep dismantling the antiquated hierarchies preventing women from ascending to their full potential.

Women's fellowship

Since 2012, when I first became a member of the women's guild, I have found great joy in participating in the women's fellowship, which has a rich history dating back to its official

establishment by missionaries.³² Prior to joining the fellowship, I underwent a comprehensive two-week training programme, a necessary step for all prospective members. This training primarily focused on the expected roles and behaviour of Christian women, highlighting the importance of self-representation and societal expectations. Interestingly, the majority of fellowship members were married, although there were also single women and widows. My decision to join the fellowship stemmed from a desire to support and connect with other women, as well as to enhance my understanding of women's issues. The fellowship, with its diverse roles and responsibilities, served as a crucial space for balancing personal goals with family obligations in addition to serving as a forum for comprehending the essence of women's empowerment. Members' relationships with the larger community were strengthened by their active participation in community service projects, which improved the local community's overall quality of life. In addition, the fellowship's dedication to common values and cultural customs was highlighted by the support given to our church, stressing unity and spiritual development within the community. Above all, the fellowship was vital in fostering and strengthening our relationships with our husbands, emphasising the value of open communication as the basis for both individual and group development. Every aspect of the fellowship programme played a crucial role in developing a comprehensive sense of agency, highlighting the significance of empowerment, teamwork, and reciprocal assistance in attaining individual satisfaction and collective achievement.

Through this experience, I was able to obtain constructive insights that shed light on the many aspects of what it really means to be a successful and resilient woman in a variety of contexts. In addition to giving me a safe place where women could grow and support one another, the fellowship was instrumental in building a network of sisterhood. It became clear that the fellowship created a strong sense of solidarity and empowerment among the women, encouraging them to pursue their dreams and goals through teamwork and sharing of experiences.

Feeling unimportant and voiceless was a heavy burden I bore for a long while, spanning many years of my existence. I internalised the limiting belief that, as a woman, my purpose was to exist in silence and submit to the dominance of men in my community as a result of growing up in accordance with the cultural expectations that shaped my mindset. But when I actively listened to other women's moving stories who openly shared their dreams, struggles, and the deplorable injustices that burdened them, a transformative shift occurred. I was reassured that I was not alone in my struggles and felt a sense of validation from their candid sharing, which spoke to my very core. It became

³² See Chapter 1 in this regard.

evident that there were numerous other women grappling with similar challenges, yearning for change, yet uncertain of how to navigate their circumstances.

The women, who meet every Friday and once a month, try to create meaning in their lives through fellowship. For many of them, this fellowship was more than simply a gathering; it was also a lifeline, a source of recognition and self-expression that had previously placed them in the outside world. They were more than merely women here; they were people with voices that deserved to be heard and talents that deserved to be recognised. As the meeting began, a sense of empowerment was always felt as we gathered as women. This is a place to develop and nature leadership skills, as well as to elevate and revere the very essence of womanhood. It reminds them that they are not mere vessels, but coworkers with Jesus Christ himself. The chairperson in the fellowship is the pastor's wife who works together with an executive of elected women.

One by one, the women stood up to tell their stories (testimonies), their voices bearing the weight of ages of oppression and tenacity. They talked about the freeing message of Christ, which had been woven into the fabric of their lives and which had set them free. The stories kept coming back to that point, the Easter morning resurrection of Christ. We are made to reflect the story of the women to whom He first appeared, giving them the mission of telling his disciples that he had overcome death. At that moment, the story and the evolving experience usually resonated with all of us.

Narratives of empowerment

I am be blessed by messages that different women preach during the meetings, especially about the love of God shown through Christ, as the centre of the messages. Christ's teachings are associated with liberation, as evidenced by his act of appearing first to women and imparting such a message. This message is often repeated during devotions. It serves as a reminder that women have a similar transformative truth to share, one that breaks the bonds of oppression and raises their standing in society. Examples of powerful biblical women such as Deborah are frequently uncovered during the preaching of the Word, offering fresh insight to women. Most of the selected preachers would choose a biblical female character with whom they identify and give a sermon on it. Gradually, the women contribute their unique sharing narratives of biblical matriarchs whose acts of devotion and bravery broke the patriarchal boundaries of their times. They would mention Deborah, a prophetess and judge who commanded armies in combat, and Esther, whose bravery prevented the killings against her people. These selected scriptural passages offer women a fresh perspective on their role as female disciples. They empower themselves with God's Word by using these biblical passages and stories to better understand who they are.

The women's fellowship provided a space where women saw themselves like the great women in the Bible, the great leader Deborah. As I settled into my seat at the women's fellowship meeting, I could literally hear the women affirming the words "I am one whose voice echoes through the sacred texts". The Gospel welcomes and uplifts me, promoting my empowerment. I refused to let the dominant norms silence me.

I am that woman present at the first resurrection, privileged beyond measure to be among the first to spread the message of hope, shattering stereotypes and exceeding expectations with my bravery. Unshaken in my resolve, I would join the fearless women of that era in challenging the established structures intended to imprison and subjugate us, laying the groundwork for a legacy of self-determination. It is obvious that the stories of the women are mirrored. Although suppressed by prevailing customs, the biblical message continues to resonate throughout the ages. The powerful liberating message of Christ's teachings is strongly intertwined with that act of appearing first to women and imparting such a big message. It serves as a reminder that women are called to share the same liberating truth that uplifts their standing in society. The message flows through all women as an epitome of empowerment. These stories are about transcendence and escaping the confines of custom, in order to declare and reclaim the truth that is within their hearts. Their voices resonate with the message of reclaiming a history long suppressed.

God's love and the naming of God

A strong sense of unity among them develop as they come together to share their experiences, hopes, and struggles. This unity is based on their strong faith in the efficacy of prayer, their confidence in God's guiding hand, and the uplifting power of divine intervention. Their unique challenges do not weigh them down in isolation; rather, they are consoled by the awareness that they are sustained and encouraged by Christ's unfailing love. Despite having different origins and life experiences, they are able to forge a bond through mutual support and shared experiences that go beyond their differences to form a spiritual fellowship that enhances their lives and strengthens their understanding of God's unending love and grace.

On many occasions, when hearing them pray, I heard "Chauta" with reference to God, although Chauta is frequently portrayed as a female creator figure in Nsenga beliefs. The Ultimate Being embodies a harmonious combination of masculine and feminine qualities. The way in which this female embodiment of the divine essence recognises and honours the matrilineal lineage, that is the foundation of the community's hierarchy acknowledges women's inherent connection to life-giving forces, is a beautiful cultural fit. This image of a female deity not only represents creation, but

it also demonstrates the strength and dignity that Nsenga culture accords to women. This made me depict an image of who God is in my life. God is “Chauta”; the great one and creator of us all.

The ultimate deity, Chauta, who represents the idea that God has female characteristics, is frequently portrayed in neutral terms in Nsenga spiritual beliefs. This portrayal is consistent with the matrilineal social structure that is the norm in the community. It is important to note that this particular aspect of gender representation highlights the diversity of viewpoints and interpretations found within the Nsenga people’s cultural and spiritual beliefs, by reflecting the neutrality assigned to the various titles associated with the concept of God. Indeed, there is a powerful source somewhere.

I also had the privilege of meeting chieftainess Mwape who was under my jurisdiction. In the chieftdom of Nyanje, I met chieftainess Nyanje. I could see the role they play in maintaining peace and order within their chieftdom and understanding the realities of the women’s experience. They spoke mostly of the God who heals, blesses, and lives among his people.

Christ the liberator

The implicit belief held by the women’s fellowship is that Jesus is a transformative figure who raises the status of women in society. The women in the fellowship read Jesus’ interactions with women from the perspective of equality and saw them as respected members of his inner circle, capable of spiritual insight and leadership roles in God’s kingdom. In their community, the women found strength in Jesus’ acceptance of them as fellow followers, his appreciation of their prophetic gifts, and his treatment of them as equal partners in his work. This causes a paradigm shift, challenging society’s pervasive gender inequality. This insight gives the women’s fellowship a strong sense of direction. If Christ had challenged patriarchal conventions, then they too could be agents of transformation. The women’s fellowship has developed into a movement for the advancement of the female spirit and role because of their shared devotion and daring defiance of unfair customs. By internalising Jesus’ teachings and example, the women discover both self-validation and empowerment.

The Bible and spiritual growth

The Word of God would always be shared in the most striking manner when I happen to attend the fellowship. When we come together to study God’s Word, worship, and pray, a vibrant atmosphere for spiritual development is created. Women receive training in biblical truth and discipline-specific mentoring; they witness the life-changing effects of the Spirit’s work in the community. The

Chigwirizano turned into a “womb” where my spiritual development and formation are continually fostered. Something amazing happens when we get together around God’s Word. Women sing and dance. Sometimes I join in on the festivities with them. We honour not only the God of creation, but also our own existence. I have started to understand how the Scriptures explain the complex piece of art of God’s creation as I read them with other women. Their various viewpoints not only bring the text’s timeless wisdom to life, but also illuminate its amazing truths. By examining common perspectives, queries, and individual experiences, my comprehension surpasses the limitations of solitary research, blossoming with an enhanced richness. Our community of faith’s collective exploration of the biblical teachings brought the lessons to life; this eye-opening experience strengthened our ties to the divine design woven throughout creation.

Spiritual living as coping mechanism

For many of its members, the women’s fellowship proves to be a place of solace and spiritual reassurance during trying times. This holy sisterhood, whose numbers far exceed those of the men’s fellowship, offer support to those who face the most severe hardships in life. While serving as a minister, I have heard innumerable testimonies from women who describe the fellowship as their lifeline. They repeatedly mention how this communion gives them a clear understanding of their own value. More importantly, it has developed into a coping strategy that strengthens them to endure the severe hardships that threaten to break their spirits. These women’s commitment to prayer and trust in God’s sustaining presence serves as the cornerstone of their coping mechanism. Through their prayer requests, members establish a space in which they can publicly share their burdens. They find strength in praying and pleading with God for help when faced with issues such as unemployment, the crushing weight of poverty, or any crisis that threatens to steal away their hope. I have seen how this prayer ritual becomes a powerful tool of hope. Through the most disheartening of situations, their prayers create a spiritual barrier that allows them to endure with grace and resilience unharmed. Through the lens of their spirituality, they are able to accept reality, while continuing to strive fearlessly for the abundant life that was promised.

A common experience of worth

The women’s fellowship in the Reformed Church provides a rich source of spirituality, as its members discover meaning and direction in their relationship with God. They have a sense of self-identity that stems from their belief that they were made in God’s image, which permeates their meetings. This realisation has given them a new identity, giving their lives meaning and purpose. There is a tangible joy as they gather to worship. Every woman is aware that she is meeting a God who genuinely loves

her and gives her a fresh, meaningful experience. There is an inner sense of peace that God is ever present in both good and bad times. The women in this fellowship derive strength from their common experiences. Their spirituality is alive, resilient, strong, and courageous enough to live out their calling as women disciples. Their spirituality is fundamentally holistic, embracing the most basic events and experiences of their daily lives.

After the meeting, the women spend time studying the Bible and letting its inspired words show them who they are. As such they came into contact with the transcendent and discover comfort and knowledge in the writings. In time of prayer, they also raise their voices in thanksgiving and supplication. These moments of oneness foster the sisters' sense of belonging and community. They gain self-awareness and this helps them realise that they are certainly worthy. They also gain inner strength from it all, which gives them the bravery to confront the obstacles in their lives.

Commitment to concrete work

In terms of church work, women have taken the lead in helping to manage the finances of the church, despite the fact that, historically, men held positions of authority. Women have demonstrated their strong moral character, by creating larger churches that exemplify the fortitude and strength of any person. Male involvement in church-construction initiatives is usually relatively low. The initiatives define women's fellowship in the context of concrete projects.

Compared to men, women perform the majority of the work. They represent the very essence of God's liberating will, which transcends all boundaries, ideologies, and oppressive constructs, as they embrace their divine calling to be vessels of compassion, hope, and transformation. Their diaconal work becomes an earth's embodiment of a symphony, in which the female nurturing spirit is not a discordant note but a harmonic resonance that reveals the fullness of the creator's majesty.

The majority of the women who take entrepreneurship classes are usually determined to launch a business and support their families, particularly widows and single mothers. When others receive funding, the women feel empowered to launch a new venture.

Blended approach to healing

Based on my personal observations, I discovered that many women regard *healing* as encompassing both the physical and the spiritual dimensions. Their approach to healing frequently incorporates a harmonious blend of traditional healing methods and modern medical practices, demonstrating their in-depth understanding of health and wellness principles. Although attitudes toward healing vary according to geography and individual perspectives, traditional medicine continues to have a

significant impact on the lives of many African women. Notably, while participating in a women's fellowship, I discovered a unique tradition involving the arrival of a new mother in the community. When a child was born, I was summoned to bless the newborn while the mother remained indoors for at least three months. During this period of seclusion, the mother would consume a concoction of herbs and specific foods to aid her recovery and increase milk production. Furthermore, as a precaution, she would bathe her infant in a medicinal solution believed to protect the child from potential harm caused by malevolent individuals. Most of the children wore something like a necklace around their neck that was believed to be protection.

Healing power of revival meetings

It was amazing to watch how people, who had at first sought mediums for guidance, eventually turned to the minister in prayer, demonstrating their faith in God's strength and knowledge. It was no surprise that women made up the majority of the attendees at the revival meetings, given their strong sense of faith and devotion to God. When the altar calls began, a surge of excited women would move to the platform, hoping for a soul-stirring spiritual epiphany. After the stirring services, several participants stood up to tell of their touching experiences with God, narrating the life-changing times when God's presence had an impact on them. One compelling story that struck a deep chord was that of a woman who, while receiving prayer, felt as though an electrical current was shooting through her body. This testimony was so potent in its demonstration of spiritual transformation and connection that it left a lasting impression on me. The woman who had been experiencing stomach problems stood among the attendees as the revival meeting was coming to an end, her hand pressed against the area of her stomach where pain had been her constant companion for years. I prayed with her while holding her hand. She reported experiencing a strong sensation of warmth coursing through her body. She was overcome by the intense sensation that began at the top of her head and descended. The pain that had been her constant companion just vanished in a matter of seconds. As the realisation of what had happened dawned on her, tears started to fall. Glancing around, she saw that many of the other guests were engrossed in their own private moments of spiritual experiences. Her experience became a testament to the power of faith and the transformative nature of these revival gatherings.

Sense of liberation and justice

The women's fellowship views their faith as a way to reclaim the truth that, as God's created creatures, women have been wonderfully made, and that they are meant to live out their callings without feelings of guilt or being apologetic of their being. Their fellowship becomes a quest for

equity, empowerment, and the restoration of their God-given dignity. Their space becomes a space of inspiration and helps develop a theology of liberation specific to the experiences of their gender, by exchanging testimonies and applying a womanist interpretation of Scripture.

In the safety of their fellowship, they realise that speaking up for justice and equity is a calling that requires dedication to raising up the voices of those who yearn for freedom and human dignity. Gender-based violence has always been a problem and is one of the topics covered in the fellowship. God's Word gives women strength, enabling them to serve as God's messengers. Sometimes they would do nothing, and other times they would choose to raise the issue with the minister, in order to get something done.

Caution and the discovery of a prophetic spirituality

I must, however, point out that a crucial caution is raised in the context of women's fellowships such as the *Chigwirizano*. It is crucial to recognise that, despite their inspirational intentions, these environments occasionally unintentionally encourage women to develop an artificial or dehumanising sense of spirituality. Pseudo-spirituality is a phenomenon that could happen when personal beliefs and experiences are eclipsed by expectations from external sources. Rather than discovering and embracing their true spiritual paths, women may experience pressure to adhere to particular ideals. I feel hurt when, at times, women are accused of being passive, quiet, and focused solely on domestic issues, while neglecting their prophetic voices and leadership callings.

I was taught at the *Chigwirizano* that the highest virtues for a Christian woman to possess are gentleness, purity, and submission. Although these attributes are very important, there was a tendency to overemphasise them, giving the impression that being a godly woman was limited to being quiet and submissive. I can still clearly remember attending women's fellowship where a teacher taught us that a woman's primary role should be to provide a calm, domestic life for herself. She promoted the idea that finding joy in manual labour is a virtue to strive for, viewing the woman of Proverbs 31 as the model, and emphasising the importance of keeping a clean home, being devoted to her husband, and providing for her children. With time, I started to realise that my inclination to lean too far toward an exaggerated piety focused on household issues was keeping me and other women from fully embracing and realising our distinct gifts and spiritual callings. In understanding that we are all interconnected in our individual journeys, it became evident that embracing a more inclusive and balanced perspective was not merely a choice but a transformative necessity. This shift in mindset led me to perceive the value of a holistic approach that not only acknowledges but also celebrates the diverse and unique ways in which we are called to express

ourselves authentically and fulfil our purposes. Consequently, I recognised the role of the Spirit in guiding and empowering us along this path of self-discovery and fulfilment. As we open ourselves to this inclusive and empowering approach, the realisation dawned that a prophetic spirituality should emerge, one that is grounded in a connection to our true selves and a trust in the guiding presence of the Spirit. This prophetic spirituality invites us to embrace our callings with confidence, knowing that we are supported by a higher power that infuses our endeavours with purpose and meaning. In essence, this more inclusive and balanced approach has started to serve as a beacon of inspiration.

Personal needs and sisterhood

I wished for a community of belonging, and the *Chigwirizano* has become my sisterhood. I was overwhelmed for the first time as a mother. I was really alone and self-conscious about my skills; hence, my decision to attend the fellowship. The wisdom and guidance of spiritual mothers and aunts surrounding me as I travel down this path serve as pillars of strength. These women radiate a strong sense of faith, as if they have been rooted in a higher purpose. Speaking with these like-minded individuals, I could note how their membership in this group gives them a feeling of empowerment; it was as though they were all holding a torch of resilience and solidarity. A lovely sisterhood that fosters connections that go beyond words and time arise from our common experiences and beliefs. Our connection is more than simply a casual friendship; it is a real bond that brings our hearts into a fabric of understanding and support for one another.

They did not pass judgment when I timidly opened up to them about my anxiety problems; instead, they showered me with compassion and useful advice from their own experiences. Older women offered to watch my baby so I could take a nap or to help with meals. Stories that intensely affected me were told in small groups, called “*Mabungwe*”, or groups of belonging. One such story featured a mother attempting to deal with the difficulties of divorce. Her pain was felt throughout the circle, igniting a wave of empathy that brought us all together in mutual grief. Just as freely as the tears came, so did words of consolation and encouragement laced with the truths of Scripture, spoken at the exact moment when her hope was beginning to fade. We walked with her through the shadowed valleys, offering her guidance and prayers until the day she was blessed with a man to marry. In addition to fostering a strong sense of solidarity, this group friendship gives women a sense of reciprocity and belonging. Our voices, which are frequently quieted and ignored in a society that seeks to minimise them, find purpose and significance through *Chigwirizano*, providing a safe haven where women’s stories are valued and honoured.

Transformative power of women's fellowship

The spiritual lives of individuals are shaped by the complex interplay between faith, belief, and practices. Women's fellowship members find comfort and connection in actively participating in religious practices such as going to church, praying, reading Scripture together, and joining in group singing. Ultimately, these activities support their emotional well-being by providing a sense of security, comfort, and community. Women often feel this emotional uplift and are more likely to believe in a higher power, which strengthens their spiritual conviction and increases their trust in something bigger than themselves. As the women gather, one can sense that they found strength, comfort, and direction primarily from their spirituality. They seek solace and security during difficult times, by clinging to their faith, which gives them courage in the knowledge that a higher power is keeping an eye on them and their children. These women derive a great sense of hope and resilience from their connection to the spiritual world, which also acts as an emotional support system.

Fellowship programmes emphasise empowerment, collaboration, and mutual support for both individual and group success, creating a supportive atmosphere that encourages agency. Participants in these communities are inspired to discover their true selves, develop self-assurance, and accept their inherent ability to influence both their own lives and the world at large. A strong sense of community is inculcated by the fellowship experience, where people from various backgrounds come together to support and encourage one another on their paths to self-actualisation.

In the place of women's fellowship, we were reminded that our voices held the weight of generations. As the torchbearers, it was our duty to carry forward the movement toward independence and self-determination. Their stories became our stories, their qualities interwoven with our own, kindling a fire within each of us to steadfastly forge ahead on our individual paths. The stories illustrate how female friendships can foster a strong sense of empowerment and solidarity, inspiring women to work together and share experiences, in order to achieve their goals. Furthermore, individual agency is enhanced by the network of sisterhood that is formed within the fellowship, which provides a platform for mutual growth and support.

By enabling individuals to take charge of their lives, agency promotes self-awareness, resilience, empowerment, personal growth, and a renewed sense of purpose.

What I have learned

As an African woman, I have always found myself wearing a variety of hats, as do many other women. Domestic workers, businesswomen, secretaries, nurses, midwives, spiritual healers, teachers,

farmers, and a variety of other responsibilities comprise the intricate thread of our daily lives. Women have been marginalised for centuries, but they have consistently shown resilience, by developing innovative strategies to challenge and defy oppressive structures. Women have emerged as powerful forces, claiming their agency and refusing to be defined by constraints, in spite of ongoing structural barriers. They have persistently worked toward equality and, with an unwavering spirit, have constantly come up with creative solutions to deal with oppressive situations. Women who were left without conventional networks of support, whether they were widows or single mothers, have bravely entered areas where society disapproves of them being there. They have launched businesses, defying expectations about what could be achieved in their situation. They became the providers, by breaking the cycle of dependency through sheer willpower, educating their children and leaving lasting legacies, building their own futures and homes without the assistance of men. Their hard-won success is now a testament to the strength of their resolve that once seemed like an unattainable dream. Their strong faith in God makes this dream possible.

Even before missionaries arrived, women had strong faith in a higher power that transcended their everyday lives. This integral spirituality among African women was not limited to colonial influences, but it persisted across generations. They accepted that there are forces beyond their understanding. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's work on gender inequality in African Christianity has been particularly enlightening to me, as it illustrates the close connection between African women's spiritual practices and other aspects of their lives. These include important themes such as the sacredness of childbirth, seeking divine guidance for deliverance, achieving economic independence, recognising connections with others, and seeking solace in the transcendent realm. Such embedded spirituality in women's lives reflects a deep-rooted cultural and social fabric that promotes not only personal well-being, but also communal harmony and interconnectedness.

Motherhood

Becoming a mother for the first time was a transformative experience that strengthened my belief in the miraculous nature of life. The grace of God felt ever-present as I marvelled at the miracle of giving birth, an act that truly exemplifies the wonders of creation. There is a natural inclination for women to embody the role of caregivers, which is perhaps why they are often entrusted with positions that require empathy and nurturing skills. This tendency is evident within the church community, as women are frequently appointed to committees that prioritise care and compassion over sheer labour. It is normal to observe women taking the lead in roles related to hospitality and support, as their innate ability to provide comfort and create welcoming environments shines through. At the congregational level, committees centred on hospitality thrive with the leadership

and involvement of many dedicated women. Their presence and contributions are invaluable in fostering a sense of warmth and inclusivity within the community. One feels the sense of connectivity with others, children, friends, and the community.

I learned a great deal and gained insight during those profound moments when I became a mother. The gatherings I attended with other women, where I saw the harmony between fertility and motherhood rituals, enhanced these life-changing experiences. Many *Chigwirizano* groups have embraced and modified the indigenous rituals related to pregnancy and childbirth, adding Christian influences to them instead of disregarding them. I remember clearly the day my son was born. The women in my church gathered for fervent prayers, and a happy baby shower featuring traditional dances and heartfelt songs was planned.

Special song: *kachokela kuti kachokela kuti kankhosa kotele,*

Kachokela kwa Ambuye (x2)

Bwelani bwelani bwelani

Muzaone kankhosa (x2)

The joyful women, their voices harmonising in sweet melodies, extended warm invitations to all nearby to partake in the delightful celebration centred around the bountiful blessings bestowed upon them by the Lord. Embracing the spirit of gratitude, the women gracefully sang a verse pondering the origins of the child present, only to affirm with hearts full of faith and conviction that the precious gift had been lovingly granted to them by the divine grace of the almighty.

Marriage

In my culture marriage is often more seen as a place where women should survive than as a union of love and personal development. A widespread view is that a woman's potential and dreams would be stifled by marriage, which would ultimately weigh her down. I have internalized this viewpoint as I got older, thinking that marriage would be a never-ending battle to be endured. The prevailing cultural narrative is that a woman's value in a marriage is largely determined by her capacity to procreate. It is widely believed that women who had more education are more likely to get divorced, which makes education for women a threat to marital harmony. There has been a great deal of pressure and tension between marital stability and personal development as a result of these cultural expectations. But as my spiritual journey has grown, I have started to view marriage in a new light. I have realized that, in contrast to what my culture has taught, God's design for marriage is far more empowering.

God has blessed me with a loving spouse who has always supported my calling. I was not sure how I would manage to juggle being a wife and my calling as a minister when we first got married. Both of these roles were expected of me in my capacity as a woman. In my culture, women are expected to take care of the cooking, cleaning, and childrearing duties at home. Wives have traditionally been expected to perform this role. I was still expected to perform these household chores despite being a career woman. When husbands assist with child care or household activities, they frequently believe they are doing their wives a favour. I had the good fortune to wed a man who recognizes my calling and understands it. Bishop Kawimbe, our marriage counsellor, addressed us as a father figure and emphasized that we should depend on one another through every phase of marriage, including having children.

My husband frequently took time off work to support me when my children were young and needed a lot of my attention. He has been a great pillar of support in my life and ministry. Many people believed that I would never be able to balance my roles as a mother, wife, and minister. Being a mother has taught me the art of living. I learned to be patient and nurturing, just as God is patient with us. I now consider becoming a mother to be both a miracle and a gift. The responsibilities of being a mother and a minister have not conflicted as I had feared. Rather, they have enhanced one another, improving my ministry as well as my spiritual life. Being a mother has allowed me to see God's love and patience in a deeper way and has given me new perspectives that I can use in my ministry.

God leads the way when one includes God in every area of one's life. This spiritual base has been crucial to helping me overcome cultural expectations and balance my roles. My spouse and I have overcome the difficulties of juggling work, ministry, and family life through faith and cooperation. Our story shows that it is possible to fulfil multiple roles while honouring one's calling and familial responsibilities when one has God's guidance and mutual support.

Reformed spirituality and the Triune God

I have always viewed my life in light of the Triune God. My journey as a woman committed to leading a spiritually transformed life in the context of the Trinity centres on developing an understanding and reverence for God's triune nature – one God in three persons. It is crucial to realise that every divine person plays a distinct yet harmonious role in influencing my spiritual development. For

example, the foundation of my faith in God's unending love and absolute power, which reminds me of my role as a child of God to surrender my desires in favour of God's plans. As my redeemer, Jesus Christ and his teachings and selfless sacrifice have enabled me to make peace with God and to live a life modelled on Christ. The Holy Spirit provides me with discernment, conviction, and the fortitude necessary to resist temptation and exhibit spiritual virtues. In addition, the Holy Spirit acts as a dependable advisor and a rock, offering wisdom and encouragement amid life's obstacles. Knowing who God is has been essential to guiding me through and past many challenges. I have been able to accept and celebrate my identity as a woman thanks to this awareness, which has also given me the ability to perceive how important faith has been in guiding my life. Had I failed to understand the nature of God, my life would have been unbearably difficult, and my identity would have been destroyed.

My faith in the triune God underpins all aspects of my spiritual journey, influencing my individual prayers, worship, social interactions, and engagement with the outside world. It makes me continually examine my words, acts, and thoughts through the prism of God's holiness, directing me to align my life with his will and give thanks in everything I do. I work to incorporate my spirituality into every aspect of my life, stressing that both good and bad are expressions of God's greater purpose. It is my belief that even eating becomes a spiritual ritual when one is mindful of, and grateful to God during the process. It is critical to approach mealtimes with thankfulness and to intentionally make savoury, nourishing dishes that support God's plans for our health and body stewardship. Cooking, eating, and even basic table prayers can be viewed as spiritual practice opportunities that build appreciation for the food provided and foster connections with the Divine. Because of the Reformed emphasis on God's holiness, I am expected to live a life centred on obeying Christ and exalting God in everything that I think, say, and do. The fear of the Lord is the foundation of this pursuit of holiness, which is driven by grace and dependent on the work of the Spirit.

God is the Lord in one's life as God works with a bigger picture that transcends our human understanding. I noticed that I was increasingly drawn to a close relationship with the triune God as I started my spiritual journey and attempted to live my life according to the teachings of the Trinity. I now have a vision of growing closer to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a result of this journey. Accepting this vision, I pledge to live a life that continually attests to God's transforming power, reflecting the impact of his grace and cultivating a spirituality that both resonates with the Divine and encourages others to pursue the same level of connection. This revelation became clear to me in the transformative year of 1989 when I wholeheartedly gave my life to Jesus Christ. I was filled with many unanswerable questions as I searched for life's purpose. My true identity, beyond the

roles and labels I currently hold, was one of the central questions. I experienced an acute sense of emptiness and yearned for confirmation of my value as a young woman as well as a clearer understanding of my purpose. Without discovering the solution, I felt alone and wondered what the real purpose of life was all about. I also wondered why God would create something so insignificant and place it in this world to function. At a crucial point in a sermon one day, the preacher stressed how each person is truly called to develop a closer relationship with God and increase his/her faith in the Lord. But the part that really struck me and brought about a sense of healing was when he mentioned that all people were made in God's image. The image of God is what I was. Finding myself in this light gave me confidence to trust the Lord. When the preacher mentioned Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future", it became clear that God had bigger plans for my life.

At that crucial moment, I felt the tangible presence of God in my life. I realised that there was indeed a greater purpose to achieve, and all I needed was to have strong faith in God. Ever since that pivotal moment, I have witnessed radical changes unfold in my life. I realised that my existence requires a divine saviour to navigate through my inner turmoil, including my struggles with anger and frustration. The journey has been about a complete and utter surrender, where one allows God have God's way. For many years, my greatest and most earnest effort has been focused on making my fellow believers aware of the vital importance of knowing God not only with our minds but also with our senses on a daily basis. I have always encouraged them to go on an inward journey of the heart and mind that brings us nearer to imitating the person of Christ. I have always encouraged them to go beyond the surface acts of religious observance to embrace a transformation that is based on reflecting the very likeness of Christ.

My trust in the Lord became stronger by the day. I came into contact with the loving God through my thorough study of the Bible. The Reformed spiritual tradition places great emphasis on the authority and centrality of God's Word. Every time I go to worship, I feel as though the Word is speaking directly to me, telling me that God loves me and urging me to act in faith. Numerous things are made possible by this trust in the Lord. It has enabled me to recognise God's presence in the face of adversity and difficult circumstances, and it has given me the courage to make brave decisions such as accepting the call to serve God in remote areas. Maybe, it was this strong sense of faith that gave me an incredible amount of bravery. It was my inner strength that overcame the outside environment.

Faith in God has always been the key. As a true Reformed member, I have always believed in the presence of God. In all my work, I have seen God being involved. There is power in the Word of God.

There were moments in ministry when I encountered resistance due to my being female. Some elders would directly ask me why I chose this path. I would voice out my opinion on the matter, backed by the Word of God. There is power in the Word of God. I would challenge the men on areas they did not want me to participate in.

Hardships, the sovereignty of God and gratitude

My life experience has led me to develop an unshakeable reliance on God as a constant source of support, consolation, and provision, especially in the face of difficult circumstances. The idea of an innately nurturing and caring force is upheld by my conception of the Sacred. Individual testimonies of God's generosity appearing in human agency and community have strengthened my understanding. Throughout my career, I have observed some congregation settings that were struggling financially. But even in these seemingly difficult settings, I saw how an encounter with God's Word helped the people realise that they were not completely penniless. They were farmers and they kept different livestock. Because of these people's giving deeds, which were moulded by their spiritual insight, I witnessed God's provision in action. They were a living example of the compassion that I identify with the sacred; they gave me the fruits of their labours. I was, in a sense, a recipient of God's loving care via human channels of compassion and faith. As I served in some of these difficult places, I often heard God speaking to me that he sends messengers and vessels to carry out his work. He always provides the means to do so and the members would accordingly agree. "God cannot send his messenger without providing the tools." The concept of "provided the tools" refers to more than simply material supplies; it also refers to intellectual, experiential, and spiritual resources that support his labour.

I now respect the diverse experiences that make up my lived reality, since each one is a special expression of the wisdom of the creator. Serving as a minister and carrying out holy work is a great honour in and of itself, and it fills me with gratitude. I am humbled by the direction and the care that God has shown me. They have enabled me to follow this vocation with dedication. This thankfulness penetrates every aspect of my being and goes beyond merely a feeling. The process of completing this assignment has changed me and given me a new-found appreciation for the extent of divine grace.

Faith always guided my steps, a faith that came with the reading of God's word. Each morning, I woke up to pray, seeking God's guidance. I did not want to be embarrassed in any way or be regarded as a failure. I would walk long distances. I walked 22km (approximately 7 hours) from Nsinda to Nyanje for a farewell service for one of the ministers. This was not a difficult task because, in school,

I participated in cross-country competitions, my favourite, and I would often get first place. As I did ministry work, walking long distances, despite being tiring, was not such a difficult task. The only challenge came when we would walk through animal danger zones. Mostly, we would stop to seek God's protection, and through prayer, we found ourselves reaching our destination and back without any danger.

Spiritual practices

Faith is the firm conviction that there is a stable foundation where one can find solace and support. Personally, I often find myself turning to the teachings and wisdom found in *the Word of God* during challenging times. Whenever I reach moments of despair or feel on the brink of giving up, the words of Isaiah 41:10 echo in my ears like a guiding light: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." These comforting words served as a constant reminder of the divine presence and reassurance that brighter days were ahead. Engaging in moments of *devotion* enabled me to anchor myself firmly on God's promises and assurances. *Prayer* has emerged as a crucial pillar of support during my lowest moments. In times of despair, I would earnestly offer my prayers to God, finding strength in the act of seeking guidance and comfort. It has become customary for me to kneel down with my eyes closed during times of intense devotion to God, asking for guidance from above, expressing my sincere gratitude, and humbly begging for strength and healing. In addition to my responsibilities as a wife, mother, and minister, the burden of responsibility associated with being the synod vice secretary occasionally left me feeling like a helpless human being. I used to get scared and doubtful of myself because it is so difficult to maintain these many aspects of identity. I wondered how I would be able to do all these roles well and never fall short. I find comfort and relief in prayer during these vulnerable times, whether it was in the stillness of the night or the quiet of the early morning, fervently asking God for help and direction to face the difficulties that lie ahead. In addition to giving me consolation and assurance, the times when I turned to God for support and direction also gave me a source of strength and resilience in the face of the unknown.

Through *faith, prayer, and reflection on the teachings of God*, I find comfort and resolve that carry me through the darkest of moments. The acts of Word and prayer shift my focus from looking at my weaker side to looking at the positive side. They help me enhance my self-esteem and charge me to seek God's will.

Self-actualisation, agency and God's will

I experienced a spark of self-worth and self-esteem when I realised the potential of my God-given identity. But this journey toward self-actualisation has turned into a firm resolve to reject the patriarchal ideas that a woman's worth and legitimacy are dependent on the approval of a man. For over ten years, I began my ministry as a single woman, defiantly resisting the increasing demands of parishioners who claimed that, in order for me to serve God with any genuine reverence, I would have to marry into the traditional expectation of marriage. I made the independent decision, in a courageous act of self-determination, to never let my marital status get in the way of my work. I developed a strong belief that, in my ministerial capacity, respect and esteem were not gifts from men but rather intrinsic qualities that came from the bottom of my being. My material and spiritual supply was a guarantee based on my faith in the boundless abundance of the Divine, not a condition to be worked out.

I realised that having a male partner was not a prerequisite for the effectiveness of my sermons or their ability to inspire and change lives. Rather, it comes from an unbroken flow of faith, a faith that acquires its nourishment from the fountains of divine wisdom. In this sense, I became a living example of the understanding that real empowerment is an inner awakening to one's potential when rooted in the infinite source, transcending external circumstances.

This journey also brought to light the truth that achieving one's goals requires not only favourable circumstances but also a commitment to putting the biblical teachings into practice. My courage and faith in the unchangeable wisdom of the divine Word allowed me to stand resolute in front of audiences who thought it impossible for a woman to hold such a position of spiritual leadership. Ultimately, God's will, which reflects the divine image imprinted on every person, is intimately related to the full humanisation and liberation of women. God's grand design recognises the intrinsic value and equal dignity of women, and it wishes for their liberation from oppressive systems and limitations.

Inner renewal and inner peace

As I surrender and pour myself out, the process of sanctification and inner renewal is initiated and becomes part of the process. The Spirit would bring my thoughts, desires, and deeds into line with divine truth, to convince, comfort, and transform me into the likeness of Christ. This process of inner transformation involves the healing balm of God's perfect love, which makes our minds fresh, our hearts pure, and our souls whole. In times when I sensed the Spirit's touch surrounding me, I took comfort in the certainty the Spirit offers, bringing healing and restoration to those parts of me that

held painful memories and old wounds. The Spirit's love unites the broken pieces of my heart, healing the cracks left by my fears and insecurities and creating a new tapestry of completeness inside of me.

Like a journey of transformation, the process of inner renewal reveals the continual shedding of the "old self". This important aspect is reflected in the giving up of earthly inclinations and corrupted desires, as Ephesians 4:22-24 highlights. This running phase may be uncomfortable, but it is a necessary part of creating richer fruits and promoting deeper connections, a cycle of growth and maturation that is central to one's spiritual and personal development. Adopting a mystical spirituality can result in significant personal transformation, providing access to a higher sense of meaning, interconnectedness, and inner peace that extends beyond the limits of the material world. This spiritual route encourages people to delve into the depths of their awareness and accept the mystery and beauty of life with awe and wonder.

Towards a mystical spirituality

For a long while, I felt as though I had no genuine relationship with God; instead, my spiritual life was simply a routine of going to church, doing my devotions, and trying to be a "good Christian". Nevertheless, over time, I noticed a strong yearning in my heart for a closer, more intimate connection with God.

This realisation led me to start a life-changing journey of purposefully getting closer to God, by spending a lot of time in prayer, worship, and in-depth study of his Word. I decided to consciously live in God's holy presence and let God's love and peace completely envelop me, no longer settling for transient encounters. God started to move in my life in ways in which I could never have imagined when I practised being still and open before him. It was an incredibly joyful experience. My soul found great nourishment in the silent times of communion with God, which filled the void inside me with the divine presence I had been longing for. This required locating a setting that fosters empowerment, self-reliance, and independence. I was inspired to take charge of my life, make choices, and pursue my goals with tenacity and resilience through my sense of agency. This approach not only helped me grow personally, but it could also strengthen communities and promote wholesome relationships. It could result in the development of a compassionate, understanding, and empathic culture where people are respected, valued, and assisted in their quest for personal fulfilment. I learnt to be still in the presence of the Lord.

Despite the times when doubts and questions arose regarding the inexplicable occurrences in my life, I have come to understand that God's interventions often transcend human reasoning. Even in

moments of adversity or discomfort, I have learned to trust that God's providence is aimed at preparing me for what lies ahead. Reflecting on various places and situations I was placed in, I now realise that each experience was a preparatory step for the next chapter of my journey. The process of preparation has been fraught with challenges, primarily rooted in learning to fully trust in God's guidance.

An integrated spiritual self

I saw myself, for the largest part of my life, through the cultural lens that was placed upon me, which held that I was less valuable because I am a woman. Something awakens in my spirit when I read the account of Deborah the judge or when I see Jesus treating the oppressed women with dignity. I understand that I am his beloved daughter, endowed with a special worth in God's eyes. Upon hearing whispers of inadequacy or insignificance, I quickly silenced them and reminded myself that I am seen, valued, and loved by my heavenly Father, as stated in Scripture. Their words have the amazing ability to change the way in which I see myself. The majority of the lessons I heard portray strong female role models. This has given me the confidence to feel safe in my own line of work. Bible study, prayer, and hearing spiritually mature women speak the truth to me have helped me realise that I am a leader, a prophetic voice, and an intercessor in this generation, gifted by the Spirit. I think that this allowed me to reach my full potential as a woman. Together with other women, I can reclaim my God-given worth and discover my special gifts as we study the Bible. I eventually came to embrace some traits that naturally sank into the centre of my being and became part of who I am as I travelled through experiences and introspection. My rational thinking blended with my emotional depths in this complex union, resulting in a balanced, harmonious me. I had come to nurture a gentle and compassionate side that was the ideal counterpart to my assertive nature. Instead of fighting against opposing impulses, I discovered a synergy that defines me. What had previously seemed like opposing parts of myself, gradually came together to form an integrated whole. In addition to giving me a sense of unity, this inner transformation also reflected my own development and evolution.

Nsenga higher power

The Nsenga people's supreme God operates on a higher spiritual level, honouring both male and female ancestors. This God, who transcends gender but is frequently associated with either male or female characteristics, sends a powerful message that resonates within their culture. During my time as a minister among the Nsenga people, I had the opportunity to witness numerous prayers in which the name "*Chauta*" was prominently mentioned. This name denotes that God cannot be addressed

as a single gender, reflecting a complex and nuanced understanding of a divinity that is interwoven into the fabric of their spiritual beliefs and practices. This was due to the fact that gender-specific experiences and viewpoints have greatly influenced religious teachings, cultural norms, and societal views that have historically shaped women's spiritual practices and beliefs. These factors have all been important in shaping Nsenga women's spiritual journeys.

Reality of the influence of the spiritual world

During my quiet times of contemplation, I was struck by the quality of faith that I saw every day. I was humbled by the villagers' unshakable faith in divine intervention, which served as a reminder of the vital role I had played in fostering their spiritual bond. The warning that the chief sounded against anyone attempting to harm the woman of God was implemented in response to widespread fears about the existence of witch doctors, who were thought to be capable of causing harm to people. The Nsenga people had a strong belief in the *spiritual world*, which included beliefs about witch doctors having evil intentions and the possibility of using charms for bad things. There is a belief in a continuous struggle between spiritual forces of good and evil, involving religious figures such as the "woman of God". An individual from the community once recommended to me that I gather protection charms to guard against the evil he perceived to be prevalent in the community. The community's strong belief in the reality and potency of witchcraft reflects a world view that acknowledges the existence of supernatural forces that have the potential to do harm. A widespread fear of spiritual attack, particularly from family members, suggests a belief in the direct influence of the spiritual world on day-to-day existence. This was a deeply held belief, as people would come to me and tell me stories of consulting with witch doctors to uncover the possibility that a relative was planning to harm them for personal gain. A common belief that spiritual forces can be used to one's advantage materialises from the idea that family members might plot harm for selfish ends. Yet there was also a widespread belief in God's ability to provide complete protection from evil forces, which led to the community's dependence on both protective charms and prayers to ensure safety. Many wore certain charms, thought to ward off negativity and bring complete protection, in an attempt to protect themselves from perceived spiritual threats.

Belief in spirits had a profound impact on daily life in the Nsenga village, influencing how its people perceived and dealt with different problems and tribulations. When faced with inexplicable illnesses, accidents, or crises, women, in particular, frequently resorted to spiritual explanations, attributing supernatural causes to these occurrences. For example, a mother may interpret a child's sudden

illness such as a high fever that refused to go away as a sign of displeasure from an ancestor spirit or as a curse from a jealous neighbour. This reliance on spiritual interpretations was particularly evident during the dying process, when families sought spiritual forces or evil spirits to blame for premature deaths. I remember a young man died suddenly and had no history of illness. The family members wondered about hidden factors as well as the circumstances surrounding his death. Immediately after his burial, they decided to consult mediums for insight and guidance. At the heart of these spiritual practices, the family would then consult the witch doctor or Nganga who revered healers who bridged the physical and spiritual realms. These revered figures, whether male or female, acted as channels for communicating with spirits and ancestors, in order to provide healing and guidance to those in need. A witch doctor, for example, could perform rituals to address infertility that is thought to be caused by ancestral disapproval, or s/he could help identify the source of recurring nightmares caused by spirit disturbances in a home. The incorporation of spiritual traditions into various aspects of life emphasised the Nsenga community's deep commitment to spiritual beliefs. Seeking protection, blessings, and solutions from the witch doctor was not only a custom, but a fundamental part of navigating life's challenges and pivotal moments.

Extraordinary gifts

Throughout my experiences, I have had the privilege of meeting women who demonstrated confidence in their ability to possess *extraordinary gifts* that had been passed down through generations in their family. One particularly vivid memory stands out. A woman confided in me about her connection to the spiritual realm, demonstrating her ability to predict future events and communicate with ethereal entities, all of which she firmly believed she inherited from her forefathers. She gave stories of her grandmother, a revered figure in her family who had also extraordinary abilities, reinforcing her faith in the transcendental powers bestowed upon her by her ancestral heritage. The essence of her narrative conveyed a deep-rooted faith in the supernatural abilities that defined her family's lineage. Her visions were interpreted as divine messages, prompting many, even members of our Christian congregation, to seek her guidance.

Being a Nsenga woman

The reality of following our culture's script was engrained in my daily experiences for the entire time as a Zambian woman. One of the constant challenges I encounter is the expectation to uphold a façade of strength and stoicism at the expense of embracing vulnerability and acknowledging difficulties. At the same time, women in the Nsenga religion have been given a special and important

role. Among the most memorable is participating in the Nsenga people's sacred *Tuwimba* ceremony, which sees the important contributions made by women during the ceremony. Having personally experienced the important roles that women played, such as serving as spiritual guides and mediators, left an impression on me. In particular, esteemed women within the community were believed to possess the power to invoke spirits, engage in powerful dances, and channel spiritual possession to bring about rainfall – a powerful ritual that underscores the close connection between women and their innate life-giving abilities. It is normal to believe that spirits take over human hosts during rituals. In order to channel these spirits, women can work as priestesses or mediums; the possession experience is a metaphor for a mysterious, divine connection.

Women were never viewed as less than men in the traditional Nsenga culture. This an example of a society in which women's spirituality has been greatly influenced by the female Divine. My own experiences have led me to believe that virtues such as *self-transcendence*, *endurance*, and *sacrifice* had a significant impact on women's spirituality. Like Oduyoye, I believe that women have a symbolic authority and play a major role in family rites and sacrifices, standing in for both their living relatives and their ancestors. One noteworthy feature of the spiritual roles that women play in Nsenga culture is that the female divinities represented the protective and nurturing aspects of motherhood, serving as the community's stewards and guardians. This distinctive quality highlights the critical role women play as spiritual mentors and guardians, guaranteeing a high level of leadership.

I have had the honour of collaborating with amazing women in my leadership endeavours, including the aforementioned late Chieftainesses Mwape and Njanje. Specifically, I had a great deal of interaction with Chieftainess Mwape, who had an authoritative presence that was on par with that of her male counterparts. I felt both familiar and inspired by these strong women in positions of authority, who reminded me of the biblical character Deborah. The fact that they were in a position to provide direction and moral support demonstrated the strength and aptitude that women bring to positions of leadership. They also provided spiritual support.

Initiation ceremonies, rites of passage, and multiple identities

In Zambian culture, initiation rites are highly valued traditions that signify a girl's passage into womanhood and carry great cultural significance. The Reformed Church in Zambia has not left out this part but has incorporated the traditional insights into their teachings. The women offer a distinct viewpoint by skilfully fusing these practices with their Christian beliefs rather than discounting them. A unique church ceremony that includes teachings and prayers that highlight biblical womanhood and virtues is held when a girl reaches menarche. Special women oversee such ceremonies.

Older women in Zambia are not only considered “mothers in the faith”, but also powerful clan matriarchs who blend traditional and spiritual roles within their ecclesial women’s fellowships. Adhering to traditional Zambian practices, these esteemed women oversee ceremonies related to conception, delivery, naming ceremonies, and life transitions, generating noteworthy and hallowed prospects for spiritual advancement and cultural preservation in their societies. In my experience serving in different congregations, I have observed that women are keenly aware of their identity and are often eager to uphold and preserve it. This raises the question as to how they go about maintaining this sense of a “multiple self” – Christian and Nsenga. There are distinct sections in a congregation, each with its own role. Notably, specialised women known as “*Alangizi*” are selected to carry out the important task of passing down the traditional values and beliefs that define womanhood to the next generation. These teachings typically take place as young girls transition into womanhood.

I received many invitations to participate in these rituals that celebrate the young girls’ coming-of-age. The girls would go through a period of seclusion during these rituals; the length of this period would often vary depending on the particular circumstances. This custom originated from the cultural indigenous practice of ceremonial seclusion. One girl spent seven days being cared for in a quiet area apart from the rest of the community. She was surrounded by the wise women of the *Chigwirizano* group and her loving aunts during this period of transition and growth. They provided her with teachings, guidance, and counselling. During this time, a number of symbolic objects, including beads in an array of colours and a piece of finely woven cloth, were purposefully displayed. Each of these objects represented a different aspect of femininity and womanhood. The women conducting the ceremonies would also offer insight into biblical teachings, taking inspiration from passages such as Proverbs 31’s story of the virtuous woman and Ruth’s touching story, which offer examples of grace, strength, and resilience. When the time came for the grand finale, I would be honoured to give a speech in which I would pray for the girl’s well-being and share predictions from sacred writings that would shed light on her future and confirm that she is a beloved daughter of God who will one day exemplify the qualities of a woman. The last day of the seclusion period was a festive occasion that combines the melodies of traditional folk songs with vibrant dancing and prayer to the almighty, resulting in a symphony of spirituality, culture, and collective reverence.

Women's spiritual journey through life's seasons

Women’s spirituality is a dynamic force that changes and evolves throughout their lives in complex ways. It is not static. It is an ongoing process of self-discovery and development, entwined with their distinct experiences, victories, and dynamic perspectives. For many women, the essence of

spirituality is most alive when faced with life's challenges; it emerges as a source of wisdom and hope in the darkest moments. These life-changing experiences, whether they are the delight of welcoming a child into the world, the sorrow of saying goodbye to a beloved one, or the difficult path through personal struggles, have the capacity to reawaken a sense of oneness with a greater existence.

Women's spiritual needs are always changing as they go through life because of their various roles and experiences. The spiritual terrain that resonates with a grandmother or mother may be very different from that which speaks to a young woman. Every stage of life offers a different set of obstacles as well as opportunities for spiritual development. The spiritual journey of a young woman entering adulthood might centre on self-discovery, examining personal beliefs, and seeking purpose in an uncertain world. The essence of spirituality may blossom as the woman seeks guidance and comfort from a variety of practices and philosophies while navigating the complexities of relationships, career goals, and personal aspirations. During this time, she frequently exhibits a thirst for knowledge and enlightenment, which leads her to embrace ideologies that reflect her developing ideals and perspectives.

On the other hand, a mother, who is enmeshed in the duties of providing for her family, might discover that her spiritual needs are entwined with her desire for resilience, balance, and a greater understanding of love and compassion. Accepting the contradictions of motherhood, she might seek rituals that validate her spirituality in her caregiving responsibilities and find comfort in quiet times of introspection and thankfulness. For a grandmother, endowed with age and wisdom, the spiritual path may go beyond the ordinary, exploring the themes of transcendence, legacy, and the relationship between the past, present, and future. Having lived a life filled with experiences, she might be drawn to spiritual practices that tell her family's story and provide her with a legacy of teachings and blessings to help her cope with later years. Women weave resilience, self-discovery, and an admiration for the elements that inspire and guide them into the web of their spiritual journeys.

Writing as a catalyst for spiritual transformation

Writing this story made me feel grateful and caused me to think carefully about the complex journey that has shaped my current reality. I have gained an appreciation for the detours and turns that have led my path to its present location as a result of this reflection. Every wrong step and uncertain moment now serve as evidence of the priceless lessons I have discovered along the journey. In fact, these experiences, which at first seemed difficult, have provided the cornerstones upon which I have

strengthened my sense of self-awareness and deepened my connection to the spiritual essence that permeates my existence. I have seen first-hand how every challenge and every disappointment have helped in my development and given me the opportunity to explore the depths of my being with fresh insight and awareness. My sense of acceptance and resilience has grown significantly as a result of the knowledge I have acquired from navigating through times of uncertainty and confusion. I now understand how important it is to accept life as it unfolds and that even the most trying situations serve to mould me into the person I am becoming.

Writing has been one of my most life-changing experiences. It has given me a sense of clarity and purpose, as well as acting as a beacon of light that shines down on the darkest corners of my being. Writing has awakened a previously dormant well of spiritual strength within me that resonates with the steadfast basis of my values and beliefs. I have a renewed sense of energy and resolve as a result of this reconnection with my spiritual essence. I am fervently committed to fully embrace the journey ahead, no matter how difficult it may be. It has served as a reminder to me that our spiritual journeys are dynamic, ever-changing stories made from the strands of our experiences, victories, and setbacks. I have gained a high regard for the almighty God, a closer bond with my true self, and a resolve to keep pursuing spiritual enlightenment as a result of accepting this story.

Writing my story was an intense form of self-reflection. By asking myself what truly mattered to me and what I wanted to achieve was crucial for exercising my agency. There were moments of deep reflection in my life. It is important to take such kind of reflection, because that is when we remain true to ourselves, and it allows us to make those critical decisions. I questioned some of the societal norms that restricted women to being mere property or objects, restricting them to the kitchen only when they could do more. It took courage and conviction for me to decide to follow my dreams of becoming a minister, which helped me create positive change. Even when I did not have a role model, I stood up for myself and said, "I shall start. No one has done it, but I will be the first." I went on to apply for the ministry, and I was accepted. One needs to take action after listening to the Word of God. One needs to stand up and change what has been done wrong into doing right. It requires courage. Writing my story has enabled me to view this with great clarity and to appreciate my own agency.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion summarises the insights acquired with this research and the major results. Attention is paid to three issues in three subsections. It analyses the personal narrative in Chapter 5. The conclusion also answers the primary and secondary questions that guided the research and that were formulated in the Introduction. In the final section, some suggestions are made about the future of the study of African womanist spirituality.

1. REFLECTING ON THE PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Section 6.2 of the Introduction emphasised that the function of a narrative is not to convey facts, but rather meaning. This should not prevent us from attempting to capture what was conveyed by a personal story. This researcher finds it difficult to move from one genre (the telling of a personal story) to another (the undertaking of a conceptual analysis); from something intensely personal to something that requires some form of “detached” perception; from a first-person to a third-person account. This was undertaken in a conversation with the study leader who posed critical questions to the researcher.

The first and most obvious question is one of structure: How was the story told? This was obviously a first-person narration by the researcher herself. The story started with setting some general context about women; this was followed by a chronological telling of her life from childhood up to the time of her career as minister of religion. This was followed by a middle and central section on the Women’s Fellowship and observations about the spirituality of other African women. Then a return to the self as adult and the telling of the story shifts from chronology to a description of themes as part of spirituality. This was followed by a focus on, and exploration of aspects of the Nsenga culture. The narrative ended with a return to the self and an account on the effects of telling a personal story on the researcher. By providing brief headings to the flow of the story, the structure could in some way be discerned by the reader.

A second and fairly easy focus now follows with the question: What are the main emphases, or motifs discernible in the story? The reality of an experience of *patriarchy* and its associated practices runs like a golden thread throughout the story. Especially the role of the father figure influenced spiritual formation. The pressure by society and especially fellow women to *internalise* social values and patriarchal stereotypes, and to conformity is particularly strong. This is a story of *struggle* on various levels – existential and religious struggle to find direction in life with a career; physical hardship to survive economically, and to find recognition amidst patriarchal belittling. The

spirituality that transpires in this instance has a definite profile; it is a spirituality of trust, hope, resilience, and intimacy with God. At the heart of the narrative lies the beauty of *relationship* with fellow women; it is a story of sisterhood, of social support. The contours of the *spirituality* that sustain that sisterhood are discernible. It is a spirituality that values the Bible as God's Word; a spirituality of trust in God, of liberation in Jesus Christ and of empowerment by the Spirit; a spirituality with practices of social service, care, and hospitality. The *multiple identities* of the researcher herself and of fellow women become clear in the movement of the story; they are women in a patriarchal society, they are Christians in a specific denominational Church, and they are embedded in traditional cultures, for example the Nsenga. The *plot* of the story, on its deepest level, is about the *agency* of the researcher and fellow women to navigate these challenges, to determine themselves amidst immense struggles and hardships. The secret of the narrative lies in the women's ability to speak, to *tell their stories*. This twin connection between agency and story-telling is the message of the narration. Story-telling and assertion of agency go together. To tell one's narrative is a form of determining oneself; to determine oneself, one has to tell one's story. This is precisely what has been recounted in the research. This is also one of the central contributions of the Circle. Finally, it is about a movement from deep intimacy with God to an outward, public encounter with society. It is a story of the *mystical-prophetic spirituality* of African Christian women.

When the personal narrative is placed in relation to the previous chapters and the states of scholarship on narrative, agency, the gender gap, spirituality as academic discipline, various views on Christian, African and feminists spiritualities, the Circle, and autoethnography, what transpires is an emphatic *confirmation* of the insights represented in the theoretical work. A number of examples can be given. The researcher's narrative underlines how important *story-telling* is and the considerable meaning it embodies. It confirms the significance of narration. The movement in the personal narrative gives much prominence to the struggle of the researcher to determine her own life, for example, with regard to her career choice. This is fundamentally a story about *agency*, about the challenge in a patriarchal society to fulfil her potential as women. This accent is in line with the discourses on agency. It shows how important agency is to think about women. The trend in scholarship on women (for example, the article by Peša) and by the Circle to think of women not in terms of *victimhood*, but as *agents*, is strongly corroborated by the researcher's narrative. The researcher portrays the success of *women's fellowship* in the church and its significance as a space-creating phenomenon for the empowerment of women. *Elements* such as the role of the Bible, faith in Jesus Christ, care, and hospitality that are given *prominence* by the Circle are all encountered by the spirituality of the *Chigwirizano* of the Reformed Church in Zambia. The relevance of the continued power of *traditional culture* and its integration with a Christian faith is a striking element

of the personal story. We can clearly perceive the value of autoethnography that gives prominence to culture. This is in line with emphases in the scholarly work of, for example, Dube (2024) and Nweke (2020b). This will take a specific form in every context. The double movement in spirituality – inward and outward – is also viewed in an intriguing way in the personal manner. The recent insights by scholars of spirituality such as Sheldrake (2013) are also evidenced in this instance. We can be justified to speak of a *mystical-prophetic spirituality*. In multiple ways, the personal narrative embodies trends in academic work; it contracts, in a sense, the various insights of the preceding chapters.

It is inevitable to ask about a *unique and distinct contribution*. Stories create worlds and it is obvious that we are inquisitive about distinct features. In a sense, not much can be labelled as “novel”. This is typical African womanist spirituality. The moment we combine the various features, the difference from a Northern hemisphere becomes clear. This is a spirituality with its own identity. There is gender oppression, and physical hardship, multiple identities of traditional culture and missionary faith, but also a pervasive communality. *Two features* emerged in this narrative that suggest something novel. There is no tension where, in secular contexts, spirituality is detached from institutionalised religion. The version of African womanist spirituality in this story is an *institutionalised spirituality*. The *Chigwirizano* is a church institution. Institutionalised religion creates the space for experience. Secondly, in the scholarly accounts of agency (in the Introduction) and of feminist and womanist spiritualities (Chapter 3), hardly any attention is paid to theological perspectives. In this story, agency is based on the notion of “image of God”, and there is explicit referencing to the Trinity. There may be glimpses of an enriching approach. This is a *theologically conscious spirituality*, meaning that the reality and significance of God is recognised. Anthropology (understanding of the human being) is based on theo-logy (view of God).

Not all stories are *entirely satisfactory*, as often noted in the review of books. Often, a story leaves us with questions and we wish for more description. We recognise that a narrative is not an encyclopaedia, but we can still identify areas that have been underplayed or where there are unnecessary silences. We can hesitantly mention *areas for future development*. The relationship with an inherited (missionary) faith is often experienced as not culturally satisfying, as it was often entangled with a specific (Euro-centric) way of reading the Bible. There is basically nothing in the story about a possible dissatisfaction with the *Reformed tradition*. The focus on the *body* in feminist thought could have been discussed. Pentecostal churches have a much greater openness to bodily expressions in spirituality than the Reformed tradition. *Violence* against women is mentioned only in passing, but violence is a major problem in society. This was underplayed. The reason for this

could be multiple – may be, lack of experience in own personal life, or simple oversight. The personal narrative refers to the belief of the women in the *Chigwirizano* in God and in Christ. Interesting, hardly anything is said about the *Spirit*. This is strange, as the Spirit is usually associated with power, which is very relevant to the plight of women. Nowadays, *emotions* in people's lives are much appreciated. The story refers to a limited number of emotions, for example trusting, but this is an unexplored feature of the story. Attention and references to these *five realities* could have enriched the story. This could perhaps be included in a future update of the personal journey!

2. ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This subsection returns to the Introduction of this study to address the primary and secondary questions, as an effort to summarise the *findings of the research*.

The *central question*, whether spirituality and the narrating of spiritual journeys could contribute to the empowerment, liberation, and, ultimately, enhancement of the agency of women, can be answered with an explicit affirmation. This has been confirmed by the work of the Circle, by academic studies from different disciplines on narrative and on agency, by the academic studies of spirituality and research methodology such as autoethnography, and by a number of theologians writing on African, feminist and womanist spirituality. This has been emphatically demonstrated by the narrating of one personal spiritual journey. This study *has convincingly argued* that there is a *very close connection* between spirituality, the telling of personal stories, and the enhancing of agency. This insight is especially relevant when applied to African women. The contribution of the study was to focus on this connection.

The study disclosed interesting results with regard to the secondary questions. The *first* one on the *position of women* in Africa and more specifically in Zambia highlighted five insights. Much progress has been made to recognise the equal status of women. But empirical studies by well-known international institutions show the reality of the gender gap that will take many decades to overcome. In recent scholarship, there is now consensus on women about one perspective. We should not refer to women only in terms of victimhood, but their agency in history, despite many obstacles, should be recognised. The impact of colonialism and the coming of Western missionary Christianity has had a negative impact on the status of traditional women. This was, for example, seen in the study by Peša (2023) that was discussed. The role of especially the wives of missionaries and their initiatives with the establishment of women fellowships is not denied when saying this. Finally, churches have not been immune from marginalising women. Women still struggle with

patriarchal prejudice and structures. This chapter justified the focus of a study of spirituality on the quest for agency.

The word or notion of ‘spirituality’ is widely used nowadays, often without a careful sense to what it refers to. The *second* secondary question about an *understanding of spirituality* and its various dimensions in contemporary scholarship was answered with reference to some of the outstanding scholars of our time.. When reading articles on African, feminist and African womanist spirituality, we often get the impression that spirituality is merely understood as religiosity. The various insights generated in Chapter 2, and summarised in its conclusion, have been valuable. The broad association of spirituality with experience, with self-transcendence, with an ultimate concern, and with self-integration was useful. This allowed the specification of the particular spirituality of the researcher and her denomination, that is Christian, Reformed and trinitarian. When this is coupled with further perspectives such as forms of spirituality and spiritual practices, we can note how it functioned in Chapter 5 with the personal narrative with specificity. Mention was made of understandings of God, of various and specific practices and forms. But it also helped translate “integration” into emphasis on empowerment and agency. Such a chapter and study enabled a narration to be attentive to *specific realities*. Those who write on African womanist spirituality should also be students of the study of spirituality as an academic discipline. This is a particular contribution of this study.

The *third secondary research* question about the *features of African womanist spirituality* was addressed at length in Chapter 3. When the research was planned, it was decided to do a thorough bibliographical search for literature on related material, that is African and feminist spiritualities, and to allow scholars to speak for themselves. A number of insights transpired in this chapter. A volume of work is available on these fields. Not all the studies evidence an acquaintance with developments in spirituality as an academic discipline. The conclusion to Chapter 3 tries to distil the various insights acquired. Some of the important ones can be mentioned, in this instance. There is definitely an appreciation and retrieval of Africa’s traditional religious past, especially in studies by South African scholars, where there is a strong link with political and public realities. There is a uniqueness about the spirituality of African women compared to Western and European feminist spiritualities. It may be justified to continue speaking of “womanist” instead of “feminist”. Several studies have emphasised the role of church women’s fellowships. Many scholars do not mention the notion of ‘agency’. It can, however, be claimed that the reality conveyed by ‘agency’ is present. Spirituality strengthens, transforms, and empowers Africans and specifically women. Some scholars such as Oduyoye (2019), Rakoczy (2011), and Dube (2024), prominently focus on narratives and spirituality.

The decision to devote one chapter specifically to *autoethnography* was intentional. This is a relatively new research methodology and fits extremely well with the focus of this study. It has several advantages. It gives the telling of stories a scientific research status, while simultaneously questioning the myths of research objectivity, by giving room to subjectivity and emotions. This corresponds with what feminist theologians, for example Nadar, write about feminist epistemology. This method allows for the retrieval of marginalised voices. This is much more relevant and effective than well-known empirical methods such as interviewing. There are studies that link African realities and spirituality to autoethnography, but no study, as far as could be determined, has studied African womanist spirituality so explicitly with this research approach. In a sense, this research has made a contribution in this regard. The *fourth secondary research* question has thus been satisfactorily answered.

The *final secondary* question about how *one story*, that of the researcher herself, would *link* spirituality, narrative, and agency was undertaken in Chapter 5, and in the reflection on it in subsection 2 of this Conclusion.

We can conclude that the research focused on the primary research question and on the secondary questions and that they have been adequately answered with valuable and productive results.

3. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN WOMANIST SPIRITUALITY

Telling stories is not simply about the past; it is also about finding the way forward, the future. When Phiri, Govinden and Nadar (2002:9) emphasise this, they are also adding an important perspective, namely that telling stories is also about “changing the way we theologize”. A brief reflection on this may be a fitting way to conclude this research.

This study indicated that *narrative and agency* are critical elements of the spirituality of women in Africa. It may be useful to *explore* these aspects in greater detail for every country. The stories of the spiritual journeys of women should be told and recorded. Initial attempts were made, and the recent work by Dube *et al.* (2024) supports this proposal. There are many opportunities to undertake this about Zambia. Some work has been done. We can refer to the studies by outstanding women in the history of Zambia, namely Allen (2010) on Betty Chungu and Kangwa (2017) on Helen Nyirenda Kaunda. This noteworthy work sets an example to be followed.

The focus on narrative and agency should, however, include more *theoretical exploration* on these notions. Stories could be told about spiritual journeys, but they could ultimately work with a vague reference to religiosity and hardly anything could be mentioned about the many dimensions of spirituality. How to tell the story of a spiritual life should be further investigated. It must be borne in

mind that there is nothing prescriptive in an autoethnographic approach. But this should not prevent us from suggesting questions or perspectives that could be referred to in the story. Some form of interdisciplinarity is required. What was done in Chapter 2 of this research gives an indication of what is at stake. The many dimensions raised in the study of spirituality, for example, the metaphors used, or the practices, or the forms can all guide the telling of a story, in order to establish a rich texture. The same applies to 'agency'. This remains a difficult idea and can be used with a vague sense. The work by Haddad (2021), referred to earlier, shows that agency can and should be contextually filled with a specific content.³³ The study by Longman (2018), also referred to earlier, points in the direction of a re-definition of agency. This applies when we talk about the spirituality of African women, and the specific challenges they face in each country and in each church. When 'agency' is used, it should be filled with greater specific content.

The relationship between theology (read: systematic theology) and spirituality is a complex one, as was noted in this study. At the same time, one of the great contributions of the Circle was the insistence on women *doing theology*. Considerable publications are also proof that this has been taken up with enthusiasm. The question could be raised as to what kind of theology would support and strengthen the twin ideas of narrative and agency? In her overview of feminist theologies in Africa, Nadar (2012:273-275) mentions ideas about suspicion, subjectivity, story, and scrutiny. These are all relevant and important, but they remain formal features. In the same volume of articles, Phiri (2012:266) states: "We need to use the model of the Trinity as the basis for the relationships in the church" [as the church is] a liberative community of just relationships". This moves the focus from the formal to the substantive. As spirituality is about an "ultimate concern" as Schneiders has so persuasively argued, the idea of God should be taken with utmost seriousness. This is a natural religious attitude in Africa. The Divine is central. Much has been written about the Trinity, also from an African perspective, but hardly anything by African women. One exception is the South African Hadebe (2016:5), who writes explicitly about trinitarian theology, and pleads for a "trinitarian theology as a liberating framework for the *Circle*". What trinitarian theology implies for narrative and for agency must be worked out. This is a major theological challenge for the future. This God – Father, Son and Spirit – invites people into the large story of creation, redemption, and fulfilment. This God enables people, specifically women, to fulfil their God-given image, to reach their full agency. The triune God is the great agent that moves with people, with women, along their journey to the

³³ The recent interesting study by Kaunda (2021) about Pentecostal married women in Zambia is a good example. He indicates how the empowerment of women is encouraged publicly, but that there is also an emphasis on women's silence regarding spousal violence. This silence is even secretly encouraged by other women. Talking about agency would take a specific content.

fulfilment of their agency. Christian spirituality is about our journey, our stories of striving to full agency, as part of God's great story and empowering agency.

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