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ETHICS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A SOPHIOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC

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Status Quaestionis and Aim of the Dissertation

This dissertation aims at exploring the ways Engelbert Mveng's concept of "anthropological pauperization or poverty" negatively influences political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Anthropological pauperization is defined by Mveng as the annihilation of one's culture, history, and very sense of being; it results from the denial of human dignity. This research affirms that

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this poverty and its multidisciplinary roots still have their effects on the participation of people in the Sub-Saharan African society, but they have not been deservedly considered in African theology and postcolonial studies.

The dissertation explores three realities that accentuate the “anthropological pauperization” of women, which in turn has negatively influenced their voice and authority: the ongoing enslaving, oppressive, and colonial patterns; the intermingling of the androcentric gender biases of Church and cultures; and violence against women. This research suggests a framework for an ethics of political participation of women in post-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa and some responsibilities of such participation for Christian political theology that considers the anthropological poverty.

Situating the Dissertation in Current Theological Ethical Thought

This dissertation draws upon African and Christian ethics as well as African women’s experiences of resistance to violations of their human dignity and womanhood. It takes a theological approach drawing on resources including African women’s theology, Jon Sobrino, Emmanuel Katongole, and Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Drawing from the Book of Wisdom (Wis 8:2–8), the research starts with who Sophia is and how her figure creates a Sophiological “hermeneutic,”¹ meaning an inclusive and power-balancing hermeneutic. Then, it uses this hermeneutic to reread the African myths, discussing the coherence between these myths and the biblical Sophia. It argues that this coherence is a ground for women’s political participation in the context of anthropological pauperization of Sub-Saharan Africa.

A primary argument of this work is that women are anthropologically impoverished in unique ways through religious and cultural histories of oppression during slavery, colonization, and post-colonial periods. These factors continue to impoverish women in contemporary eras, not only economically but also and especially anthropologically. To address this situation, the author advocates for an interplay that can enhance both individual and community well-being; an interplay between the sacredness of life of each person, a salient principle of Christian ethics, and the collective consciousness of solidarity that is distinctive of African cultures.

¹Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 115.

This dissertation imagines such an interplay by undertaking the task of moral imagination using narrative criticism as a method of biblical exegesis drawing from the French exegete Daniel Marguerat.² It assesses the foundations of the political participation of women in African traditions and Scriptures, using the feminist biblical lens, especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's insights on the "discipleship of equals."³ Through a "sophiological hermeneutic,"⁴ the dissertation identifies the epistemology that arises from women's resistance to anthropological poverty. Finally, from the perspectives of a liberation theology and political theology of hope for Africa, it explores the ways the passion of anger, when it is solidaristic and resistant, offers a particular epistemology of liberation and effective means of women's social participation in modern contexts of violence.

Development of the Argument

The first Chapter explores the scope of Anthropological Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. It draws on the Jesuit Cameroonian, historian, and anthropologist Engelbert Mveng. The latter argues that anthropological pauperization of black African people is rooted in slavery and colonization, and continues to expand in the postcolonial era. The chapter discusses these historical events and their ongoing effects on African peoples. This chapter develops the scope of anthropological pauperization, considering how women were doubly impoverished through these past events, including through the collusion of colonial power and Western Christianity.

The second chapter addresses the challenges of anthropological poverty to African Religion and African Philosophical Ethics in Sub-Saharan Africa. It explores African philosophy regarding the communal and harmonious relationship between people in African ethics to suggest a vision of communion centred on solidarity with the marginalized in Sub-Saharan Africa. This chapter explores African theology and the interconnection of storytelling, traditions, cultural belief, and contemporary lived experience. The author

²Daniel Margeurat, "Entrer Dans Le Monde Du Récit," in *Quand La Bible Se Raconte*, ed. Daniel Margeurat, Paris: Les Editions du CERF, 2003, 36.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th-anniversary ed, New York: Crossroad, 1994, xx, 27.

⁴Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, 115, 163. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, "Wisdom Mythology and the Christological Hymns of the New Testament," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Robert Louis Wilken and University of Notre Dame, Studies in Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity, no. 1, Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

engages male African theologians' insights on African traditional religion (ATR) with the African proverbs to demonstrate the extent to which African male theologians overlook the anthropological impoverishment of women within the ATR. The chapter shows the ways this impoverishment is accentuated more acutely in contemporary postcolonial societies, especially in contexts of wars and mining-conflicts.

The third chapter grounds women's political participation in historical figures and African myths by the means of a sophiological hermeneutic. The author discusses ways of addressing the intermingling of traditional cultural beliefs with Christian androcentric teachings and how these two worldviews currently act to dampen women's political participation in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. She provides the first response, suggesting a reversal of a patriarchal reading of African traditions and cultures. This reversal uses a sophiological hermeneutic and discloses grounds for political participation as displayed through the agency of female African mythical and historical figures. Using the narrative criticism method that helps to read narratives and biblical texts as an "implied reader,"⁵ the author explores how African myths and historical figures provide grounds for individual dignity and the collective consciousness of solidarity with the marginalized.

The fourth chapter assesses the theological grounds of women's political participation in CST and Scriptures. It starts by reading CST through the lenses of political participation. It argues that, although CST assumes equal dignity and equal rights to participate in society for both women and men, it includes androcentric and patriarchal claims, especially throughout the encyclicals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These biases do not help to reverse the view of male domination of women in every sphere of life; they dampen the political participation of Christian women in Sub-Saharan Africa. Then, the chapter discusses the misinterpretations of the fictional, mythical, and legendary stories of the Bible that the author terms as "biblical illiteracy" and how they serve as a basis to a continued view of women as weak and deceiving beings. The author builds upon women's experiences to show how this illiteracy looks like as praxis and how it negatively affects women's political participation in society. The author ends this chapter by extensively exploring texts that affirm the equality of dignity assessing the ways they enhance

⁵Struthers Elizabeth Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: Learning to Listen to the Story," *Catholic Theology and Thought* 72 (Winter 2013) 13.

political participation of women in society. This approach, the author argues, is still overlooked in the teachings of the Church.

From the perspectives of the experience of the female victims of violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, the last chapter discusses the ways this violence informs any Ethics of Political Participation that is grounded in CST and Scriptures. The author undertakes the same sophiological hermeneutic, building upon the narratives of women resisting violence to show how practical wisdom is revealed therein and affirms, on the one hand, the sacredness of the individual and the collective consciousness of solidarity for individuals and community well-being on the other hand. She demonstrates how an epistemological knowledge arises from women's resistance to violence to inform the ethics of women's political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the context of grave abuse of women's bodies, womanhood, and dignity, and contexts of armed conflict linked to mining.

Considering that since the context of violence against women is not limited to the African continent, the dissertation claims that an ethic of political participation that takes women's reality seriously as dialogue partner must consider women and violence against women as *loci theologici*. This dissertation affirms that suffering of women as disclosed in this research constitutes the field for divine revelation. She concludes by including arguments for solidaristic and resistant anger, based not only on cognition, but also on conative dimension, on emotion-compassionate love which drive solidaristic practices of women. The latter arguments produce an ethic of participation that is inclusive of traumatized women whose voices are most needed and least heard.

Overall, the author puts together a set of theological and ethical criteria and values drawn from African traditional religion and Christian tradition to suggest a political ethic of participation. She recommends an ethic capable of reconstituting the dignity of women and men; an ethic that can help put together broken bodies and spirits, enabling women to get up by the power of faith, to rise from "cheap death," or needless deaths and "live as resurrected beings."⁶ The "cheap death" are those that we could avoid in a more just political system, more responsive to human dignity. The author suggests an ethic that can dismantle the structural injustice that leads to the "cheap death."

⁶Jon Sobrino, *Christ The Liberator: A View from the Victims*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001, 12-14, 74-78.

Implications of the Study

The dissertation concludes by assessing the extent to which Catholic Social Teaching's discourses on participation and the preferential option for the poor lack an adequate analysis of the specific reality of anthropological impoverishment of women of the Sub-Saharan Africa. The option for the poor needs to consider the dimension of the "conative interruption" of anger that women's narratives disclose as a sign of the times. The author rearticulates the Christian virtues of fortitude and prudence in the contexts of grave abuses of womanhood, connecting them to solidaristic and resistant anger through which women's sacredness of life can be significantly ennobled. She suggests that Catholic social ethic of political participation that takes these realities seriously should consider "pauperization" as cultural realities, not only as economic.

This study has shown why typically anger is not considered a virtue in Catholic social ethic, especially not for women. Rather, despite Catholic Social Teaching's affirmation of inherent equality of women grounding women's political participation in society, the teaching and Christians themselves tend to draw on Bible and tradition to consider submissive women as virtuous. This consideration has long hindered women's political participation especially in contexts of grave abuses of human rights. This dissertation has extended on a virtuous anger and has shown why Catholic social ethic of political participation needs to include a solidaristic and resistant anger; a virtuous restorative anger that arises from a wisdom that supports inclusion and balance of power.