

Thank You For Making Me Strong: Sexuality, Gender and Environmental Spirituality

Yvette Abrahams

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to situate issues of sexuality and gender orientation in an ecological perspective. It is well known that most plant species are not two-gendered, although a few trees are like the human species: male, female and intersex. Some animal species, such as snails, are fully intersex. Moreover, Over 450 animal species have been observed exhibiting homosexual behaviour. Yet only one species has been observed to exhibit homophobia. As such, what requires explaining is why the human species is so ill at ease with what is a perfectly normal variation which can be observed throughout nature. This paper locates species diversity in a pan-Africanist discourse which argues that the true cultural import is homophobia.

This is About All of Us

Starting with the politics of the thing is the South African way. Our politics are indivisible from our theology. Our practice is often very different from our theory, but it matters that at least the theory is on our side. When you have been bruised, battered and bullied, you don't have much else but the moral high ground. It may be windy up there but it is your own. In *Conversations with my Sons and Daughters*, Mamphela Ramphela writes,

Your generation has both the opportunity and the responsibility presented by living in an African country that has stretched its idealism to recognize and protect the rights of all people, including those with sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, to develop your capacity to confront and protect the human rights of such people. It is appalling that as a society founded on a human rights constitution we can tolerate the abuse of lesbians through so-called corrective rape and murder in the name of African culture.¹

This African culture is centred on a notion which has become known by its Xhosa name: *Ubuntu*. Derived from the word for people—*abantu*—it is generally translated as 'I am because you are'. The South African First Nations roots of

1 Mamphela Ramphela *Conversations With My Sons and Daughters* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2012) 53.

Yvette Abrahams is Extraordinary Researcher in the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape. This article is part of the work of formulating an eco-feminist perspective which calls us to renew our stewardship of the most abundant of God/de's grace, namely Creation. <yvetteal@telkomsa.net>.

this concept are expressed in their very name for themselves: *Khoekhoe*, meaning people of people, as opposed to animal people or plant people. In the idea of *Ubuntu*, then, we find immediately the notion of an imminent divinity. In each of us is the spark of the divine. The great creator has made us to be dependent on each other. If you are not healthy, then neither are we. Therefore our task here on earth is to live together well, bearing in mind that the action of each one has responsibilities for the wellbeing of the whole. No doubt we human beings are so proud that we would live alone and independent if we could. But we cannot. That is how we are made.

The founding father of our nation, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela exemplified this quality of *ubuntu* when he wrote our new Constitution. Like our national anthem it begins with God/de:

We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.
...
May God protect our people.²

Like any multi-ethnic state must, our Constitution deeply respects the separation between church and state. Else we would long ago have perished in civil war. In fact this separation should be read as an expression of our trust in God/de. There are many ways up the mountain, but there is only one table mountain. So shall all religions find their way to the one truth in time. Yet despite the secularity of our Constitution, often criticised for being too westernised, it carries at its heart the African ethos: our people for each other and the divine in everything. We can do nothing without God/de. Although many of us had severe disagreements with Mandela and the Charterist movement as a whole, in this sentiment we were united. We may be a secular state but our politics must partake of the transcendent nature of the first ancestor. Our institutions may be non-denominational but in our morals and our ethics the secular derives from the source. The glory of Mandela's vision was that human rights are indivisible. In the spirit of crafting a document that would ensure that what had happened to us could never happen again, he argued that the only way to achieve this was to make sure that *everybody* had rights. In his own words, 'Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world. Let freedom reign. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement! God bless Africa!'³

2 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), Preamble, <www.thehda.co.za/uploads/images/unpan005172.pdf>. Accessed 22 April 2014.

3 Nelson Mandela, Inauguration Statement, (Pretoria, 10 May, 1994), <www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3132>. Accessed 22 April 2014.

In this sense, Mandela's vision was not about loving people of all sexual orientations and gender identities *per se*. Possibly Mandela may have, but the approach was a profoundly strategic vision. The only way to guarantee that we ourselves are free, Mandela argued, was to ensure that everybody else had freedom. As long as one group or culture was oppressed, he felt, the mechanism of oppression itself would continue to exist in our society, harbouring the risk that it would one day be used against the very same people who thought themselves safe. In this sense, Mandela gave us a Constitution that expressed the heart of *ubuntu*, as well he should, being descended from a Khoer grandmother. It said their freedom was dependent on our freedom.

Mandela managed to give voice to a rare space of unanimity in South African politics. Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, one of Mandela's sternest critics, espoused the same morality. As he put it: 'We are what we are because the God of Africa made us so. We dare not compromise, nor dare we use moderate language in the course of our freedom'.⁴ For Sobukwe, therefore, to discriminate against somebody because of an accident of birth would have been a blasphemous act. Instead he looked at the social construction of identities, arguing that the identity that forms a basis for unity must of necessity seek its own destruction. Sobukwe saw the celebration of identity as a process, not an end in itself. Otherwise we become locked into the identities shaped by oppression and ultimately end up reinforcing the very system which oppresses us. Sobukwe explained it as follows:

Politically we stand for government of the Africans, for the Africans, by the Africans, with everybody who owes his loyalty only to Africa and accepts the democratic rule of an African majority, being regarded as an African. ... I have said before and still say so now, that I see no reason why, in a free democratic Africa, a predominantly black electorate should not return a white man to Parliament, for colour will count for nothing in a free Africa.⁵

This makes sense since race in its modern sense, as in scientific racism, arose under specific historical conditions such as slavery and colonialism. Sobukwe reasoned that if you transformed the material conditions structuring certain hierarchies of identity, the identities themselves would eventually disappear. The disagreement between Sobukwe and Mandela which led to Sobukwe's exit from the African National Congress Youth League to form the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959 was therefore not one of ideology but of tactics. Everyone agreed that the ideal was the end of race. But Sobukwe disapproved strongly of an alliance with the South

4 Mangaliso Sobukwe, Speech as President of the Students' Representative Council (University of Fort Hare, Alice, ZA 21 October, 1949), <www.sahistory.org.za/archive/robert-sobukwe-speech-university-fort-hare-president-students%E2%80%99-representative-council-21-oct>. Accessed 22 April 2014.

5 Mangaliso Sobukwe, "The PAC Case", in *Speeches Of Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe: PAC Basic Documents* (2012) (Public Speech, 1959), 13, Web. <<http://ilizwe.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/pan-africanist-congress-basic-documents-2000-constitution.pdf>>. Accessed 22 April 2014.

African Communist Party, which is indeed to this day one of the more Stalinist of Communist Parties. Sobukwe, though a committed African communalist who placed great emphasis on the class struggle, believed that we would be better served remaining outside the antagonisms of the Cold War.

The same argument can be applied to sexualities and gender identities. The issue is not: are we different? The issue is that unless our society accepts—nay, celebrates—difference, we will end up building a world where even the most heterosexual single-gendered person can be oppressed. I am because you are. Your freedom depends on our freedom. It is irresistible to add that this reasoning applies with even more force to sexual orientation and gender identity than it does to race. Few of us Black⁶ people, going to bed one night, will wake up in the morning finding ourselves with a son or daughter who is white. But we may well find ourselves with a family member or friend who is gay, lesbian, transgender or intersex. We might even find ourselves shifting orientation in mid-life. So this particular freedom is more important than most to entrench. Today it is about us. Tomorrow it is you or your loved ones.

From a later political tradition, at least in its own eyes consistently more radical than the ANC, we continue to find this insistence that freedom must come for all, or it can come for no one. Black Consciousness theorist Steve Bantu Biko said, 'We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.'⁷

Biko wrote in the tradition of both Sobukwe and Mandela with the argument that the struggle against white supremacy must have as its end goal a society where racial oppression does not exist. The goal was not to recreate hierarchies, but to abolish the notion of hierarchy altogether. This is a difficult task for people who have not known anything else but hierarchy all their lives. Biko defined the most important enemy of Black Consciousness not as white supremacy, but as the black inferiority complex. In this spirit comes Biko's most famous epigram: '...the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'.⁸ For Biko, the true enemy lay within.

On the one hand, Biko privileged identity politics because his activism recognised the primacy of experiential knowledge. Political mobilisation requires us to work to our strengths, and the one thing we can fully know is the reality of our lives. On the other hand, this reality is shaped by the political and economic

6 This essay follows the established usage of the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania in using a capital 'B' for Black when referring to race as a social construct and a small 'b' when referring to black, the colour.

7 Stephen Bantu Biko, *I Write What I Like*, edited by Aelred Stubbs (ProQuest LLC, Cambridge, 2005), 42.

8 Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 68.

system within which we learn ways of knowing. Biko perceived the potential contradiction between process and outcome precisely because to act only on what we know is to risk our struggle being shaped by a hierarchical present: ‘This is the major danger that I see facing the black community at the present moment—to be so conditioned by the system as to make even our most well-considered resistance to fit within the system both in terms of the means and of the goals.’⁹ Essentially Biko was saying that we can become intellectually disabled by hierarchical systems. We do not know or we do not remember what free people think like. And we cannot know what we do not know. That is why we have God/de.

Mandela’s strength was to capture this ideological middle ground. He began with the things which we all agreed on. When he said that his rights as a heterosexual man depended on our rights as marginalised sexualities and genders, he was speaking to the heartland of South African ideologies. Because of this conviction, Mandela supported Mosiuoa Lekota and others who argued that if we were good enough to fight in the struggle, we were good enough to enjoy equal rights. It is important to understand this, because our struggle for equal rights of sexual orientation and gender identity was born within a crucible of a larger struggle which shaped its moral and ethical context. We sorted it in 1994 because we might as well. As Lekota himself said:

... within the broad struggle to make sure that our society recognized and accepted the humanity of all its people, that within that broad struggle this issue was now raising a subordinate struggle, if you like. Subordinate in the sense that it was not a primary struggle at that point in time, but nevertheless that sooner or later this struggle too—the right of recognition of the orientation of men and women, whatever it may be—that this too was a struggle that would have to be fought sooner or later. Indeed, if it was not resolved within the broader struggle I am referring to, that somewhere in history there was a moment when its place would be claimed by that struggle as well.¹⁰

To our founding mothers, fathers, and parents the right to sexual orientation and gender identity was not necessarily about the rights of a marginalised group of people. It was about the claim to the humanity of the mainstream. Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke for this ethos when he said: ‘I am as passionate about this campaign as I ever was about apartheid ... I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. ... I mean I would much rather go to the other place. I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this.’¹¹ It was an

9 Biko *I Write What I Like*, 36.

10 Patrick Mosiuoa (“Terror”) Lekota, “Address at Simon Nkoli’s Memorial Service”, in *Sex and Politics in South Africa*, edited by Neville Hoad, Karen Martin and Graeme Reid (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005) 152.

11 Palash Ghosh, “New Frontier? Pope Francis And Desmond Tutu Speak Favorably Of Gays And Lesbians”, (*International Business Times*, 29 July, 2013, <www.ibtimes.com/new-frontier-pope-francis-desmond-tutu-speak-favorably-gays-lesbians-1363439>).

old joke during *apartheid* that if whites were going to heaven as their churches claimed then we did not want to go, or we would end up cleaning up after them there as well. Tutu was saying that his very claim to humanity—or *ubuntu* if you will—lay in his ability to love all God/de’s people. He refused to serve a God who asks him to practice hatred and discrimination. Equal rights in Tutu’s world is thus about him, and his faith, and his ability to embody the spark of the divine. Like the best pastors do, Tutu both expresses a common ethic and points out a path for us to become better people.

This is About the Earth

Of course, South Africa does not exist in isolation. We are fortunate to live on a continent which is constantly birthing creative theories. We may struggle to build houses or feed people, but we theorise very well. We should work to our strengths. Pumla Gqola’s fresh feminist re-reading of old Africanist ideas calls us once again to look beyond the superficial differences to ask difficult questions about values. In this sense, being African has become less about race or ethnicity and must be examined in the light of what people believe. If we believe in victimhood as the only possibility then we narrow our imagination. Gqola says that it is in the space where we deny ourselves the ability to dream of freedom, where the best we can think of is to substitute one set of oppressions for another, that violence occurs. Gqola writes and I cite at length:

All violence as I have discussed here whether it limits movement or silences self-expression narrows the range of what is possible. The use of the threat of violence to kill autonomy is an old oppressive tactic. We can continue to treat each situation as separate and allow ourselves to be confused even as we feel in very concrete terms the erosion of hard won freedoms everywhere on the continent, until all African women are again silent children as we were under colonizing regimes. We can pretend the onslaught is in our imagination. Many of us grew up with boys and men that held hands as friends and/or lovers. If I remember this clearly and Adichie raised in a different part of the continent remembers it too, many of you do too. When did we become people who consider affection so threatening? When did Africans who have been various kinds of Christian and Muslim for many centuries find it impossible to live with difference? When did this become the African way?

Accepting that being docile, disowning our variety and versions of ourselves that gave us joy in the past is what being African is today is doing missionary work against ourselves. It is being complicit to being rendered homeless and agreeing to terrorise others until they, too are metaphorically exiled.¹²

12 Pumla Dineo Gqola, “The Time Again For An Africanist Imagination”, (Lecture, Steve Biko Foundation & University of Fort Hare, Alice, 2014), <<http://sbf.org.za/pumla-gqola-speech.php>> Accessed 22 April 2014.

The violence, ultimately, becomes directed against the self. We become complicit in a system in which we ourselves are both victimisers and victimised. Gqola quite rightly raises the fact that different forms of oppression are interlinked, and that along with the backlash against alternate sexual orientations, we have also seen an anti-feminist and anti-poor backlash.

Unless we seek to undermine the system of hierarchy itself, the one which makes violence thinkable because heterosexual = superior and lesbian = inferior, we would be perpetrating the poverty of the imagination which Gqola has located at the root of our crisis. In this approach Gqola echoes Wangari Maathai.¹³ Maathai, surely one of the least docile of African women, wrote extensive analyses of the reasons behind the (self)destruction of the African environment. At first she could not understand Africans cutting trees, because to her to do so was cutting off the source of life itself. She found the explanation—not an excuse but an explanation—in our history. For Maathai we have internalised the greed which drove other people to own and colonise us. Now we are our own oppressors. Citing the Old Testament Book of Numbers 11, Maathai draws a comparison between the Israelites rejecting manna from Heaven and our current destruction of our habitat Africa. Wangari Maathai writes, ‘The word “craving”, so implicated in the physical exploitation of the environment, indicates psychological desperation and spiritual weakness. It illustrates a want that goes beyond simply filling one’s belly or satisfying one’s thirst.’¹⁴

Maathai identifies limitless greed as rooted in a deep spiritual crisis. If we truly felt loved by God/de, she says, we would not need all the material things for which we are destroying our mother, Afrika.¹⁵ Maathai feels that we have lost the sense of spiritual belonging that is our birthright. It came, she says, when we lost our faith in ourselves, our ability to believe, and to do right:

As the story in Numbers attests, the desire for more made the Israelites forget horrible experiences in Egypt such as slavery and imprisonment. At the same time, this desire itself can create intense suffering, by allowing us to disregard the past and not plan for the future. To be able to control that craving, to say, “No more, enough is enough”, is a

13 For more context on Maathai’s spirituality, cf. Janet Muthoni Muthuki, “*Rethinking Eco-feminism: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya*”, (M.A. Thesis, University of KwaZuluNatal, 2006), <<http://hdl.handle.net/10413/2366>>; Julius Gathogo, “Environmental Management and African Indigenous Resources: Echoes from Mutira Mission, Kenya (1912-2012)” in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*. vol. 39 n.2 Pretoria (2013) 33-56; Florence Namulundah, *Wangari Maathai: Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist* (Herndon, VA: Lantern Books, 2014).

14 Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values For Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010), 46.

15 Following the usage established by the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania, this paper uses the spelling ‘Africa’ to refer to the geographical space and ‘Afrika’ to refer to our lost motherland.

matter of monumental discipline. This will not occur unless it is linked to the raising of consciousness that is essential to healing the earth.¹⁶

We have forgotten who we are and where we came from. This greed which dominates our Motherland today comes from a deep spiritual hunger because we have lost something which is not replaceable by material wealth, namely our very identities:

While I could understand to some extent the government's paranoia about holding on to power, what I couldn't fathom was why the environment was not as important to my fellow Africans, or Kenyans, or even Kikuyu's, who were in the government or in positions of authority in society, as it was to me. *Why were political leaders behaving as if they had colonized their own country*—and, in so doing, had facilitated the exploitation of natural resources like the indigenous forests and land by handing them over to their political supporters or making them available to corporate interests? Why were they disinheriting their own people and future generations? Then I realized that it was not just the poor who had been culturally uprooted.¹⁷

Maathai defines this death of imagination as an absence of *kwimenya*, a Kikuyu word meaning 'self-knowledge'.¹⁸ Because we lack a sense of self, we continue to endlessly seek it, to fill the emptiness inside with material things, using violence to acquire what we cannot get by honest means.

If we are estranged from ourselves it means we do not know the spark of the divine which is inside each of us. We have in the deepest, most fundamental sense lost touch with what is real. This applies to the rich as much as the poor. Only it seems as if the rich are more convinced we need to destroy one another to fill the void. They seek through domination to steal another's self-hood. Perhaps the anger in Africa towards people who claim a different sexual orientation or gender identity is located precisely in this void because we have had to accept our sexuality as a conscious act of affirmation. To come out of the closet, we have had to know who we are, and while for most of us it has been an arduous journey we have had to undertake it with a sense of self-love and pride. Else we would have been physically or spiritually dead by now. We make a joke of the fact that every time a Mugabe, a Nujoma or a Zuma seeks to divert people from issues of poverty, corruption and greed, they whip people up against us. That way, people forget about both spiritual and physical hunger as they practice innumerable cruelties against each other and us. The rich stay in power, the poor stay poor and my people are raped, imprisoned, or dead. But forcing us to pay a price in pain and violence for our sense of self will not stop us from feeling it. Therefore

16 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 49.

17 Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), 166. Italics mine.

18 In KiSwahili *Kujijua*. Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, (New York, Random House, 2009), 170.

those who have lost their *kwimenya* continue to be jealous of us. We have what they have lost, without which no worldly goods can bring joy.

In this sense, homophobia in Africa speaks to the core of today's African identity. It is indeed, as South African political thinkers have argued, about African souls, people who in Gqola's terms have forgotten how to imagine the divine in themselves. Maathai comes to a similar conclusion when she argues that the impact of colonialism caused us to forget our core values, namely respect for immanent nature and one another. This caused an eschatological crisis from which we have not yet recovered. She draws many examples from ancient Kikuyu culture to show that because we believed that God/de lived in mountains, trees and rivers, we practiced a respect for nature which ensured that we always lived within our means. We did not use more than what we needed, and because of this we always had enough. We did not cut more trees than would regrow, nor did we emit more carbon than our forests could absorb. In this way those simple religious beliefs protected both us, and our children for generations. Whether this was deliberately set about by our ancestors or whether environmental sustainability was simply a byproduct of an *ubuntu* which included all species and the entire ecosystem, is perhaps not the point. The point is that when we lost our sense of identity and traditional values we doomed our children and ourselves to everlasting poverty.

Laying out her argument, Maathai devotes much time to examining the destruction of climax ecosystems and its replacement by monocultures. She deplores the waste inherent in this approach. For her, diversity is in itself an important value. A diverse ecosystem is a healthy ecosystem, one which is resilient to external shocks and provides for its entire species in abundance. This reasoning applies also to culture:

For all human beings, wherever we were born or grew up, the environment fostered our values, nurtured our bodies, and developed our religions. It defined who we are and how we see ourselves. No one culture is applicable to all human beings, none can satisfy all communities. Just as we are finally starting to see the value of biological diversity, we are also belatedly recognizing that humanity needs to find beauty in its diversity of cultures and accept that there are many languages, religions, attires, dances, songs, symbols, festivals and traditions, and that this cultural diversity should be seen as a natural heritage of humankind.¹⁹

A system which does not respect diversity and tries to consist of one species is doomed to permanent instability. It lacks balance and requires an enormous input of petrochemicals to keep it going. The monocultural approach to agriculture is now busy destroying the world's climate system. Maathai demonstrates the opposite way. Her insights into the links between cultural alienation, physical and spiritual poverty is what drove her to celebrate diversity and plant trees. Trees

¹⁹ Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, 177.

store water and capture carbon. These qualities enable trees to play host to a multitude of species and varieties within species, each one contributing to harmony within diversity. We should not be surprised that Maathai's ecological approach to diversity enabled her to be supportive of people of many sexual orientations and gender identities. She probably just saw us as part of the ecosystem. After her death, Gay Kenya paid the following tribute:

She was also very passionate about Human Rights, and earlier on at Gay Kenya, when we were looking for supportive voices we had reached out to her for support. She was extremely supportive and advised us not to expect it to be easy. In fact our battle for equality and non-discrimination would be just as hard if not even harder than that for the environment. When we pointed out that the Church would be our most unsympathetic source for homophobia, she pointed out that Kenyans are deeply religious, but that did not stop her from reclaiming forest land grabbed by the politically-connected religious elite. As if repeating the words of Martin Luther King Jr. who said, "The arc of history is long but it bends towards justice..."²⁰

This affirmation should not be seen as charity or patronage on Maathai's part, but simply an expression of what she truly believed. For her, diversity was a sign of abundance. Enforcing conformity was a harbinger of poverty, both spiritual and material. Therefore she emphasises that:

The economy and the culture of many native peoples has shifted from a sense of collective responsibility for community well-being based on shared public space and the common good to an individualistic ethic that focuses on self. Whereas in the past the community could be defined by how it shared the bounty of the land with itself and visitors, now it is disorientated and disconnected from the land and the customs that physically, environmentally and morally sustained them. Such changes in perspective on the natural world have been both cause and effect of the loss of self-respect and concern for the environment that has affected us. So much that was based on values has been lost.²¹

It is not necessary to enter into arguments about whether she was factually correct. Certainly Maathai makes a powerful case for the Kikuyu of her youth which resonates with our studies of the historical Khoe. From West Africa, Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey assure us that diversity was alive and well in the land of his youth:

... when Africans say lesbianism, or women marrying women, or men marrying men, is not traditional to us, any clear-headed political analyst, anthropologist or sociologist in this part of the world, would know that in Igbo society it was common for women to marry women, when faced with that situation in the absence of their husband, and be seen as the wife of the older woman.²²

20 "Gay Kenya pays tribute to Prof. Wangari Maathai", Pambazuka News 550 (2011), <<http://www.pambazuka.net/en/category/features/76750>>. Accessed 22 April 2014.

21 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 55.

22 Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey, *African Anarchism: The History of a Movement* (Cape Town: Bolo Bolo Anarchist Collective, 2013), 94.

It is important to be specific about time and place. Colonialism was merely one in a series of traumatic events which had affected Afrika. In order to understand our history it is important to study the period of slavery which preceded it. We have not fully mourned the loss of some millions of able, active Africans taken in the flower of their youth to labour in a foreign continent and the deaths of millions more in raiding and the Middle Passage; or fully considered the implications of this loss to the families and communities which were deprived of their loved ones and forced to flee themselves. It is something to consider in today's Africa where people demonise their own children and cast them out of home, that at one time we valued human life and family values deeply. Be that as it may, many of the fault lines that plagued Africa and rendered it susceptible to colonial conquest stem from the impact of slave raiding on our cultures. Some of us responded by collaborating in slavery and colonising ourselves. Conversion to Christianity a few centuries later played a role in offering some women and disadvantaged ethnic groups a path out of the systemic violence which had arisen as a result of the slave trade and consequent internal diaspora.²³ If it had been a healthy Christianity, we may have been fine doing this.

Now of course, many have argued that the problem is not Christianity as such, but the interpretation put upon it by those who proclaimed the faith. It is important not to pit one religion against another, but to ask ourselves what form of religion is being practiced. True faith finds love no matter in what language or creed it is expressed. For instance Wendell Berry, who views Christianity as his native religion, argues that the problem of alienation arises in a wrongful interpretation of scripture:

... Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God. ... We have no entitlement from the Bible to exterminate or permanently destroy or hold in contempt anything on the earth or in the heavens above it or in the waters beneath it. We have the right to use the gifts of nature but not to ruin or to waste it. We have the right to use what we need but no more, which is why the Bible forbids usury and great accumulations of property.²⁴

There is no escaping the question of values. An environmental theology can derive first principles from many religions, and the Bible itself demonstrably lends itself to many interpretations. Berry's sensitive reading, along with that of many other Christian theologians,²⁵ is fully compatible with respect for the earth

23 Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity Of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1978); Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

24 Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation", in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 308.

25 Maathai, for instance, devotes an entire chapter to Christians whose prayer in action served to protect

and all who live in it.²⁶ Therefore it would be too simplistic if one phrased this issue as merely a pitting of one religion against another. Surely a truly African consideration must include the kind of values which are promoted in the name of religion. The problem remains that for those of us who come from Africa, we have to acknowledge that we had options. We still need to understand why these were not exercised. Maathai locates this problem in an arrested development when she says:

... the transition Africans underwent from indigenous practices and worldviews to imposed spiritual and cultural systems from elsewhere was rapid, and in many cases incomplete. Consequently, while many Africans want to say they don't believe in a traditional way of life, their understanding of, say, the Christian doctrine of suffering and redemption is often non-existent and only skin deep.²⁷

In this she speaks to the very heart of Khoekhoe culture and spirituality. The Khoe, as befits a micro-nation rooted in the land of the origins of humankind, hold as a prime spiritual tenet that the only thing which is constant is change. Diversity is important because it celebrates change. We were not afraid of change; we held fast to our culture and traditions in what constituted a right and proper way to embrace change. Within the framework of our belief system, what was important was not so much what you did as how you did it. We believe that it is in the process of changing consistent with your values that you truly discover yourself. We held numerous ceremonies celebrating the passage from one time of life to another, knowing that the one enduring truth—as in God/de's love, or, another word for ultimate reality—was that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Water is a metaphor for the Divine in our spiritual thinking: it is always itself, yet it is constantly changing. Because it is part of every living being, it is always changing from one state of being to another.

Similarly, the health of the Divine Spirit as expressed in Creation rejoices in the constancy of change, in the great dance of being where new steps are always being invented but the rhythm remains the same. This approach is the cognitive relative of Berry's notion of the 'continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God.' In celebration of growth and change, many early Khoe converts embraced Christianity, being alienated only when they discovered that the Christianity taught to them was asking them to forsake their value system. If we were born to change, and if we would have changed anyway were it not for slavery and colonialism, then it seems that the crime against humanity committed

both nature and social justice. Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, 157-170.

26 Kapya J. Kaoma, *The Creator's Symphony: African Christianity, the Plight of Earth and the Poor* (Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications, 2015); Kapya J. Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu* (Zomba: University of Malawi Kachere Press, 2013)

27 Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, 181.

by these systems was not merely the violence, but the trauma that hindered us from healthy growth and change.²⁸

In Maathai's interpretation, arrested development has meant neither a healthy traditional religion nor a healthy Christianity. Instead we have sought the worst of both. For this reason, we cannot wholly discount our own agency in forsaking the Gods of our ancestors in favour of a new God. A problem arises when we remain in denial of the price we have paid for this. We have not grieved our losses and so we cannot move on. Thus part of what makes Maathai's analysis strong is that it is grounded in a historical and contextual specificity. It would have to be qualified as it is applied to different times and places in Africa. Still, what is important is the fact that she says it. When she identifies our losses, she allows us to go through the grief and come out on the other side. She shows us that running away from our sorrow only makes things worse, delivering us to anger, dividing us from God/de and rendering us susceptible to the temptation of being cruel to each other:

The reawakening of *kwimenya* can provide individuals with deep psychological and spiritual clarity. There is enormous relief, as well as anger and sadness, when people realize that without a culture one is not only a slave, but also has in effect collaborated with the slave trader, and that the consequences have been long-lasting and devastating, extending back through generations.²⁹

Here, Maathai is making a powerful statement about values. She is saying what life ought to be, and indeed she is right. Trying to fill a spiritual hunger with material things is like drinking alcohol instead of water when you are thirsty. Your thirst is not slaked and you feel much worse the next day. In the same way, to disguise your undone grieving and your fear of growth and change as religion in the name of a stultifying, hierarchical, oppressive belief system is a sin no matter what name you call it. When your only way of finding a sense of self is to bully people whom you can other, then we used to call it 'white', 'westernised' or 'European'. Now that it is to be feared we must simply call it wrong.

To blame God for our wrongdoing is only adding insult to injury. Tutu is right when he refuses to worship such a God. What too many Africans have done is abuse wine as water, which is treating the gifts from the source with disrespect and ingratitude, suffering an emotional hangover thereby, and then projecting this inner turmoil onto anybody that they can construct as a victim: women, the poor, another ethnic group, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and intersex. It gives a momentary relief in a life filled with pain and destruction to a soul which has

28 Yvette Abrahams, "My Tongue Softens on the Other Name: Poetry and People in Sarah Baartmann's Natural World", in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, edited by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

29 Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, 171.

lost sight of heaven. For if God speaks to you in the voice of hatred and greed, you must know there is something wrong with what is being preached. Denying this truth will only bring us to where all the many other denials about what we have allowed to be done unto us have brought us: pain as the place where nothing changes.

The role of a caring ministry in this situation must surely be to remind us of God/de's forgiveness and love. We should not be further alienated by a preaching of hatred and violence. We have worshipped at that shrine for too long already, and in running away from our grief we are busy taking the ecosystem down with us. The simple beliefs that preserved our lives and our cultures are what we lost under the impact of the colonising religions which taught us that trees are not holy, and that God/de lives only in a building or on a piece of papyrus. When we lost the beliefs of our ancestors we lost a part of ourselves which was irreplaceable. According to Maathai, we have been seeking ever since to fill the gaping hole. In the seeking we have fallen so low that we have managed to forget even what it is we have lost.

I am not saying that we should cling to the memory of slavery, dispossession and imprisonment. There is little to do with pain but to put it behind us and in the hands of the great healer. What is being said is that we should remember we are the people who overcame; the people who wrote poetry, sang praises and dreamt of freedom. We have the freedom, now, to take responsibility for our actions. It is no longer enough to blame the slave raiders and colonisers. Yes, they came, and yes, they may have been for a short while militarily more powerful. Yet we did not have to allow them to conquer our souls. Only we can answer to God/de for the use to which we now have put our spiritual powers. Sufficient generations have passed from colonialism for us to ask the right questions:

- ♦ What have we become?
- ♦ Who are we that we cut trees, dam rivers and kill gay people?
- ♦ How could we have forgotten our God/de, who shone on us in our darkest hour and brought us out of slavery?
- ♦ What kind of gratitude is it which destroys the Earth we are given?

The spiritual identity crisis which we are undergoing is fundamentally a crisis of faith. We have stopped believing in a God/de who loves us. Therefore we cannot love one another as the image of God/de. Instead we destroy the planet which bore us and indeed, if that is to happen perhaps it would be best to be destroyed along with nature. For who are we without our Mother?

Prayer in Action Creates Wholeness

This essay has located gay liberation in South Africa within its broader context of a general search for liberation from race, class and gender domination. It has placed its successes and shortcomings within the general gains and losses of South African society. It is important to remember in these days—where greed begets corruption, which begets lies and hypocrisy, which begets violence—that violence against the community of lesbians and other marginalised sexual orientations and gender identities cannot be understood on its own. To do so would be to diminish our struggle.

The essay has further sought to connect this analysis with the environmental spirituality³⁰ of one of its greatest practitioners; meaning by this approach to emphasise that South Africa does not exist in isolation but is part of a larger continent whose thought and creativity interacts with our own. Lastly, it has pointed out that environmental theology raises fundamentally the question of values, and that this debate stretches beyond our continent. Yet we would not be Africans if we could not participate in a discussion of values on equal terms.

It remains only to repeat that this debate also cannot only be about violence against gays, lesbians and their comrades. We cannot allow ourselves to be isolated from our nations and cultural communities. To make sense, our situation has to shed light on the question of violence in Africa generally. For surely the victory of the South African example is that we know we cannot only be lesbians. We have to act as full citizens of the continent we seek to claim.

In concluding, therefore, it would be good to discuss how we broaden the social and spiritual spaces where people of alternative sexual orientations and gender identities can live. Religious leaders are meant to be healers of human communities and the demonisation of sexual minorities robs of them of this critical role. African spiritualities cannot survive in the abstract; they must be embodied in people who in turn must be embedded in a living ecology. Maathai counts as not least amongst those affected by the depredations a colonising Christianity caused on this continent in the form of attacks on traditional healers:

One resource for pre-colonial Africans that is sorely missed is the traditional healer or medicine man or women, which in Western terms would be defined, at least in part, as a psychiatrist. Both provide a similar service, in that they attempt to plumb the psyche in ways that cannot easily be reached by either surgery or drugs. They possess a natural ability to listen and empathize, and are skilled in responding to emotional trauma and suffering. As repositories of the wisdom gathered over generations, traditional healers served an important function in indigenous societies. If the colonial administrators had

30 Perhaps, in view of her own disclaimer that 'I am neither a theologian nor a student of religious or faith traditions', it may be better to name Maathai a spiritual practitioner rather than an environmental theologian. Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 19.

not demonized them—as they had to their own traditional healers—they might have introduced them to reading and writing and thus been able to share, in written form, their knowledge as it evolved with the times.³¹

From an ecological point of view, traditional healers were critical in caretaking the land and its creatures. Plants used for medicinal and cultural-spiritual purposes often senesce and die if not regularly harvested. They also vary in their strength according to the seasons, the time of day, the weather, the soils and the micro-climate. A particular plant can be poisonous at one time of year and medicinal in another season. The knowledge, therefore, not only of the plants but of their place within a broader human ecology formed the chief part of a healer's training, and in their meetings and modes of organisation they collectively served the function of regulating what could be harvested and when. In this sense they were the caretakers of the environment and this expressed in practice their broader therapeutic work. Human beings are happiest when in harmony with their environment which is created by God/de for everyone's pleasure and joy. So in seeking to drive traditional healers into extinction—or at least into the closet—demon hunters undermined a fundamental part of Afrikan regulatory systems of commons management.

As part of their function as keepers of the human ecology, it should not be surprising that traditional healers were not afraid to hold political leaders accountable. Kapya J. Kaoma, in his brilliant exposition analysing popular cultural critiques of authoritarianism in Zambia, has pointed out that traditional healers also played an important role in governance:

In many cases, spiritual mediums were watchmen/women of community wellbeing. By claiming to speak for God as well as the ancestors, diviners claimed power over the rulers. As in the Bible, where prophets were spokespersons of Yahweh, Africans believed that mediums were possessed with higher powers. No living leader claimed power over them without risking the throne. Although it was common for chiefs to manipulate diviners, mostly diviners had the interest of the community at heart.³²

The more we were divided, the easier we were to conquer. Traditional leadership rested fundamentally on respect. A chief without authority is not a chief, but authority is only granted by the free will of the community. Removing democratic checks and balances, such as forbidding women to speak in public and insisting they defer to their husbands, assisted the colonial regimes in creating dictatorial chiefs who were easily picked off or bought out, one by one. No one rose to defend them except their nearest kinsmen who had eaten from their pots. In the same way, when demonising traditional healers the missionaries weakened their power and thereby weakened the whole community in its established systems of governance.

31 Maathai, *The Challenge For Africa*, 180.

32 Kapya John Kaoma, *Democracy, the Oppressed and the Church in Africa (The Case of Zambia)* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2015), 124.

From the perspective of sexual orientation and gender identity, destroying the institution of traditional healers removed one of the spaces in which women could make an independent living. In the context of colonial land dispossession, this was a devastating blow to those people who did not desire heterosexual marriage. Certainly in Southern Africa, this customary mode of expressing alternative sexual identities was fatally undercut by colonial conquest and mission churches. Of course many still remain. The institution itself, however, has not escaped the influence of westernisation. As Nkunzi Nkabinde observes:

The history of black lesbians had been extremely difficult to uncover until we started focusing on same-sex *sangomas*. The heterosexual male *sangomas* who control our oral history and the information that is passed down from generation to generation have insisted that we keep same-sex relationships secret. People know that it has existed for a very long time, but no one is supposed to talk about it. When pressed, our elders acknowledge that it has always existed secretly amongst *sangomas*.³³

Silencing is one of the most important weapons of oppression and free speech is often the first step we take towards liberation. Still, the diffuse and multi-valent politics of the closet are surely the most complex of all politics. Secrecy has sometimes existed, not to shame, but to protect. So for instance the role-playing of butch and femme functioned historically to protect the femme—two people holding hands in the street are less likely to be attacked if one of them looks like a man. It should not be forgotten that one of our young post-*apartheid* heroes, Zoliswa Nkonyana—the 19-year-old murdered for being a lesbian—died fighting off her attackers so that her girlfriend could escape.³⁴

Similarly, we should not read the secrecy imposed on *sangomas* as a single value imposed purely for purposes of oppression. This may well be true in some instances, but we can also read the extent of the closet as an indicator of our relative freedom. The fact that many young lesbians today don't do role-play, instead exploring multiple or agendered identities, must surely be a sign of how far we have come. No doubt it was frustrating for those traditional healers who found themselves closeted against their will. But secrecy did serve to protect an historically important institution and the role these people played in society. The extent to which we can begin to speak and write about our existence and our duties is surely an indicator of an increasing degree of freedom. In short, it is perhaps time that we began to discuss not traditional healing as opposed to Christianity

33 Nkunzi Nkabinde, "This has happened since ancient times ... it is something you are born with": Ancestral Wives Amongst Same-Sex Sangomas In South Africa" in *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, edited by Ruth Morganand Saskia Wieringa (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2005), 232.

34 Yvette Abrahams, "Womanist Notes Towards Living in the 'New' South Africa II" in *Outliers, a Collection of Essays and Creative Writing on Sexuality in Africa* (Vol. 2, Spring 2009), <<http://www.irmweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Outliers-no.-2.pdf>>. Accessed 26 April 2014.

or Islam, but rather the ways in which people of like values can work together to serve the source. Surely, in view of the ministry that must be done, in working together caring for troubled souls and assisting them to heal, we could achieve a level of maturity such that we spend less energy debating doctrinal differences and more time remembering that we are one.

As such this essay closes with an expression of gratitude. Audre Lorde has written of living in a society where, in her words, 'we were never meant to survive'. She says:

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society—Black or gay—I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight. To be proper. To look 'nice'. To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, so stay human. How much stronger a person I became in the trying.³⁵

Similarly, in learning to stay alive and hold on to my values as a lesbian living on this continent, I have had to stretch my abilities, stand up for my beliefs, and discover anew each day how absolute is God/de's love for me. I owe a debt of gratitude to homophobia for making me stronger in my faith. I could not have done it alone.

35 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name* (London: Pandora, 1982), 157.