

Introduction: Religion and Gender in the Media Marketplace¹

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of the decolonial turn in scholarship, we reflect on the implications of the exclusion of Africa and Africans from the epistemological labour involved in the development of the field of religion and media. In reviewing recent developments in the field of religion and media studies in Africa, we reveal the research dearth produced by the scarcity of studies in religion and media in Africa, which focuses on the interplays and overlaps between religion, media, and gender. This introduction illustrates the possibility that gender perspectives, approaches, and theorising might contribute to the advancement of the field of religion and media in Africa and examines the possibilities that are generated by the seven contributions featured in this volume. In recognising the discursive, material, and contextual nature of knowledge production, we understand how, through explorations in the religion-media marketplace, the limitations of traditional notions of the *field* and the *archive* are challenged.

KEYWORDS

religion and media; gender; African; religious pluralism; media marketplaces

¹ This special issue was supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa under the auspices of the Desmond Tutu Chair in Religion and Social Justice (Grant Number: 118854) and the University Capacity Development Grant from the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in the research are those of the authors alone; the NRF and UWC accept no liability in this regard.

Africa in Religion and Media Scholarship

The politics of knowledge production and circulation in the academy determined that the *mainstream* corpus of religion and media research has been dominated by theoretical schools located in North America, Northern Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom.² Notwithstanding the identity politics which can be gleaned from the asymmetry generated by this arrangement, the development of the field reflects the history of the humanities and reveals a wielding of positional power and privilege which has, to a large extent, contributed to the exclusion of Africa and Africans from the epistemological labour of the field. The problematic of this arrangement, however, does not undermine the important and excellent work that has arisen from the very intellectual silos that it has produced.

Since the mid-2000's, a small yet influential and growing body of scholarship, dedicated to the study of religion and media in Africa, has emerged. The 2006 volume, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, edited by Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors³ focused on the religious and socio-cultural consequences of media policy, politics, and practices. A third of the contributions explored the religion and media nexus in Africa and were featured alongside contributions from the Middle East, India, and Australia. In 2015, scholars of religion, Rosalind Hackett and anthropologist Benjamin Soares, in their publication *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*⁴ brought together insights generated by the first ever continent-wide conference on religion and media in Africa, held in Nigeria in 2008. This volume offers rich and nuanced historical, empirical, methodological, and theoretical reflections on the multiple entanglements of religion, media, culture, and politics on the continent.

² Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997); Stewart M. Hoover, Jolyon P. Mitchell and David Morgan, *Religion, Media and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); David Morgan, "Mediation or Mediatization: The History of Media in the Study of Religion," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, no.2 (2011): 137-52; Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, no.2 (2011): 119-36; Mia Lövheim, *Media, Religion, and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³ Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁴ Rosalind I.J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

In 2018, Felicitas Becker, Joel Cabrita, and Marie Rodet produced a collection of essays entitled, *Religion, Media and Marginality in Africa*.⁵ By expanding the notion of media beyond limited conceptions of electronic or digital, this collection examined so-called new and old media side by side, in order to avoid ascribing a technologically-determined emphasis or reinforcing an empirically unfounded and unhelpful “evolutionary distinction” between media technologies.⁶ The editorial approach of *Religion, Media and Marginality in Africa* advocates a forward-thinking generative transdisciplinarity which contributes to the expansion of the field of religion and media beyond the limitations that technology-focused considerations might impose.

By contrast, the edited volume, *New Media and Mediatization of Religion: An African Perspective*, also published in 2018 under the editorship of Gabriel Faimau and William Lesitoakana,⁷ begins by addressing the dearth in scholarship on new media technology and religion in Africa. The editors opted to isolate new media, both social and digital, as the area of focus. As a result, the publication explores the possibilities that a narrower and focused reading of religion and technology might bring for the development and expansion of the field. Furthermore, Faimau and Lesitoakana predict that the increasing ubiquity and accessibility of social and digital media represent the beginning of a third wave of media scholarship in Africa.

These collections with their foci on African media localities and practices are indeed signs of promise and are testimony to the growth and potential of the field. They are valuable for their reflections on the intersections of religion and media, the rich and varied empirical and ethnographical insights they contribute to the production of new knowledge about religion and religiosity on the continent, for the questions they raise, and for what they tell us about the ways in which the production of meaning is engineered and negotiated through multifarious processes and practices of mediation and mediatization. Overall, the study of religion *through* the media has opened the field, not only to new sites of research but also to novel topics, subjects, theories, and methods. The work produced on religion and media in Africa, some of

⁵ Felicitas Becker, Joel Cabrita and Marie Rodet (eds.), *Religion, Media, and Marginality in Modern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018).

⁶ Becker et al. *Religion, Media, and Marginality in Modern Africa*, 5.

⁷ Gabriel Faimau and William O. Lesitoakana (eds.), *New Media and the Mediatization of Religion: An African Perspective* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

which is showcased in this issue, can therefore be regarded as constituting a direct contestation of the aforementioned asymmetry that has characterised the general development of the field.

Religion in African Media Studies on Gender

The politics of knowledge production has been earnestly taken up by the decolonial turn in scholarship. The meaning of this juncture in the history of the academy is particularly significant for its implications for the production of new knowledge about religion. Media forms and practices, with the complexities of their technology and the capricious particularity of their modalities of production and circulation as a site of knowledge about religion, challenge traditional methods of inquiry, and confront limited notions of the nature of *the archive* and *the field*.

The work of African media scholars demonstrates a critical and, in many cases, a social justice commitment to interrogating gender's entanglement with the media. Much of this work is concerned with the ways in which media content both supports and contests gender norms, especially these kinds that deny the full humanity of those who do not uphold the *status quo*.⁸ Collectively, African scholars have produced a distinct oeuvre of media and gender scholarship which offers insightful discursive and material analyses that engage the ever-expanding archive of media content that is produced and circulated via television programming, feature and documentary films, news media, print, social, and digital media. By engaging these sites, scholars have described and theorised the representation of women in and through various media productions, examined the reproduction of patriarchal gender tropes through media material, and explored the politics of inclusion and exclusion that accompany either the absence or presence of women in the media. These contributions to the disciplines of African media studies include explorations of topics that have focused on female characters on television programmes, films, news and cartoons, depictions of sexual harassment in films, as well as reflections on the challenges faced by women as media practitioners and owners.⁹

⁸ Ngonidzashe Muwonwa, "Gendered Narratives and Identities of Nationhood in Documentaries on Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) between 2000 and 2009," *African Communication Research* 4, no.3 (2011): 449-68; Duncan Omanga, "The Wanjiku Metonymy: Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Kenya's Editorial Cartoons," *African Communication Research* 4, no.3 (2011): 411-32.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Audrey Gadzekpo, "Review Article: Battling Old Ghosts in Gender and African Media Research," *African Communication Research* 4, no.3 (2011): 389-410; Audrey

Notwithstanding recent developments in the field of gender and media research, religion is mostly and unfortunately treated as though it is a marginal issue. This does not imply that African media scholars working in the area of gender and media have not addressed the issue of religion in their work. However, it is the marginality afforded to the topic of religion which constitutes an analytical blind spot that might be remedied by more transdisciplinary engagement. Hackett and Soares, in under-scoring “the importance of studying the media when studying religion in Africa”¹⁰ and the importance of studying religion when studying the media in Africa, suggest that the study of media development has largely ignored religion and has instead been preoccupied with questions of development and democracy. Research has shown that in many African countries, the democratisation of the media is intimately entwined with constitutional commitments to religious freedom and political promises of greater plurality and inclusion.¹¹ Furthermore, the neglect of religion in the study of gender and media in Africa can be regarded as a consequence of the ever pervasive yet empirically weak secularisation thesis and has resulted in a failure to acknowledge the powerful material and intersectional ways in which religion is involved in the configuration of people’s material realities and bodily experiences.

Certainly, we are not advocating for an “add” religion, Africa, or gender and “stir approach” – this is about a genuine intersectional, decolonial method for the study of religion, media, and gender. By nuancing the

Gadzekpo, “She Made Me Do It! Discursive Frames and Representations of Spousal Murders in The Ghanaian Press,” in *The Architecture for Violence Against Women in Ghana*, eds. Kathy Cusack and Takyiwaa Manuh (Accra: Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre), 265-85; Audrey Gadzekpo, “Missing Links: African Media Studies and Feminist Concerns,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 1 (2008): 69-80; Audrey Gadzekpo, “The Hidden History of Women in Ghanaian Print Culture,” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Colleen, L. Morna and Pauliina Shilongo, “Mainstreaming Gender into Media Education,” *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 25 (2004): 133-7; Colleen, L. Morna and Sikhonzile Ndlovu, *Gender and Tabloids in Southern Africa: Mirror on the Media* (Johannesburg: Genderlinks, 2008).

¹⁰ Hackett and Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*.

¹¹ Lee-Shae S. Scharnick-Udemans, “A Historical and Critical Overview of Religion and History in Public Broadcasting in South Africa,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 30, no.2 (2017): 257-80; Azonzeh Ukah, “Managing Miracles: Law, Authority, and the Regulation of Religious Broadcasting in Nigeria,” in *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, eds. Rosalind I.J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Hackett and Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*.

notion of decoloniality to deliberately include an intersectional analytical lens, we are able to clearly discern the neglect of gender as an area of focus in the study of religion and media, and of religion in the study of media and gender. This reproduction of the separatist approach which has separated African issues from the rest of the world, has also, to a large extent, isolated gender and religion from the mainstream corpus of their respective disciplines and discouraged the kind of transdisciplinary work for which we are advocating. We assert that more extended collections of research such as this issue may begin to address this hiatus. It is therefore critical that, in this particular historical moment, a deliberate and sustained effort is made to include gender as a category of core analytical consideration in the study of religion and media in Africa.

Religion and Gender in the Media Marketplace

One of the leading scholars of religion in Africa, Azonzeh Ukah¹² refers to Nigeria as one of the most “vibrant marketplaces for religion and media.” We hereby propose a dual understanding of the term “religion-media marketplace.” First, the term “religion-media,” instead of the “religious media” formulation, is employed in order to show that the breadth of this discussion expands beyond the scope of media, which is owned and operated by religious institutions. Second, following Ukah and in light of the multiple dynamics of deregulation, diversification and subsequent reregulation of media across the continent, we suggest the term “religion-media marketplace” as an idiom for describing the complex political economies within which religion, gender, and media interact. We propose that the particularities of African contexts determine an approach to media, religion, and gender of religion that is conscious of the ways that religion and media have both been reconfigured by the specificities of local contexts. These incorporate an engagement with political processes, including the democratisation and re-regulation of the media as well as socio-cultural transformations of religion that have occurred for a number of reasons, including democratic interventions, migrations, and socio-political unrest.¹³

¹² Ukah, *Managing Miracles*.

¹³ Cf. e.g. Rosalind I.J. Hackett, “Devil Bustin’ Satellites: How Media Liberalization in Africa Generates Religious Intolerance and Conflict” in *Displacing the State: Religion and Conflict in Neoliberal Africa*, eds. James H. Smith and Rosalind I.J. Hackett (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 153-208.

The contributions in this volume allow us to suggest that the aforementioned comment by Ukah may be extended to the rest of the continent. Geographically this issue represents explorations which are materially grounded in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Kenya, while additional contributions are located across time and space in digital worlds that are inhabited by Egyptian and Nigerian communities. The authors demonstrate the kinds of diverse data, topics, and analyses that can be generated from searching for gender in the religion-media marketplace. In the expanse of the religion-media marketplace, the authors have uncovered pressing questions and issues entangled with gender in discourses, narratives, and rhetoric, found on the bodies of individuals, the sounds of voices, the cultures of algorithms, the politics of elections, the reproduction of space, the immediacy of memes, and the manufacture of caricatures. Furthermore, the authors have shown that these representations and expressions of religion, religions, and religious diversity found in the religion-media marketplace are intricately interwoven with broader questions both in the academy and the world. These include issues related to the contestation of gendered religious authority, the politics of piety and belonging, the religionisation of politics, the economic imperatives of the commercial media, the transformation of theologies across time and space, and the reproduction of colonial gender tropes through seemingly banal iterations of religion.

Finally, the contributions in this issue attempt to contest the dominance of the Pentecostal-Charismatic bias in the African religion-media marketplace. Half of the contributions focus on Islam, one is focused on a general reading of colonial Christian morality, and two are directly addressing what Pype calls, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Popular Culture."¹⁴ Although the numerical and social dominance of these traditions are clear, the religious diversity of Africa extends well beyond Christianity and Islam. Unfortunately, the paucity of religion and media studies which focus on the other traditions which colour the religious landscape of the continent, warrant more attention than we are able to provide in this introduction. However, we suggest that the same kinds of decolonial intersectional approaches which raise gender as a critical concept in the study of religion and media in Africa may yield more nuanced and representative meanings and approaches to the concept of religion.

¹⁴ Katrien Pype, "The Liveliness of Pentecostal-Charismatic Popular Culture in Africa," in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Post-colonial Societies*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 345-378.

In the first contribution, “Broadcasting Female Muslim Preaching in Kenya: Negotiating Religious Authority and the Ambiguous Role of the Voice,” Hassan Ndzovu discusses the complicated and controversial presence of female Islamic preachers on radio stations in Kenya and how this media presence destabilises traditional notions of religious authority. In this exploration, Ndzovu shows how, through the mediums of radio and voice, critical issues about the role of women in society are raised and engaged. He demonstrates how the tensions raised by the voices of female Islamic preachers are managed by the very presence of these preachers, since their “reading of Islamic doctrine does not differ from that of traditional Muslim clerics.” Ndzovu contests the impression that the presence of female Islamic preachers is necessarily indicative of a more progressive interpretation of the role of women in society. He reveals how each element of the female preacher’s airtime is regulated in order to complement and reinforce patriarchal readings of Islamic religious texts which structure Muslim societies in Kenya. Ndzovu’s argument not only provides insight into mediated tensions between theologies and technologies but also comments on the changing character of Islam in Kenya in the wake of shifting religious-political alliances.

Similar to how religious beliefs and rituals produce sacralised temporality, media technology has facilitated the production of communities that are unbounded by traditional notions of time and space. In the article “Gender Bargains in a Pentecostal (Born-Again) Marriage: Divorce as a Socio-religious Discourse in the Glorious Vessels International Chat Group,” Peter Oderinde invites readers to explore online lived Pentecostalism through the instant messaging service, WhatsApp. This group is the online community of a Nigerian-led Pentecostal church, Glorious Vessels International based in Zurich, Switzerland, that regards this digital media platform as a dual opportunity to build an online church and to supplement its local ministry. From a rich data set, Oderinde focuses on the ways in which the Pentecostal couple is constructed against the background of the theological understandings of gender roles, economic status and previous relationships. As a researcher operating in the intimacy and complicated anonymity of a mobile chat group, Oderinde explores the discourses and rhetoric produced through the “reterritorialisation of non-spatial environments” and reveals the ways in which biblical patriarchy informs discourses around the roles and rights of born-again Christian women.

Drawing on the mediatization of religion theory, Nelly Mwale, in her article, "The Nature and Significance of a Muslim Woman's Contest for Mayor of Lusaka, Zambia," argues that, during the mentioned mayoral campaign, the media acted as a conduit for relaying messages on Islam. In this article she traces the potential and limitations of the ever-popular mediatization theory in the Zambian context. In doing so, she highlights how popular iterations of this theory over-emphasise the socio-cultural processes that place media in a position of power over religion, while occluding the politics that play a critical role in regulating the ways in which religion, gender, and media interact and operate within the public milieu. Set against the background of the nominally Christian status of Zambia by focusing on the gendered and religious messages which were propagated by Sirre Muntanga, her opponents, and the media, Mwale demonstrates how the media were used to clarify Islamic religious ideas on Muslim women's participation in politics.

Anthropologists Katrien Pype and Alessandro Jedlowski, in surveying "Anthropological Approaches to Media in Africa," include a brief yet erudite reflection on religion and the media in Africa. According to Pype and Jedlowski, new media in particular have opened novel avenues for exploring the production of both religion and religious belief and practice through "the emergence of new mass-mediated moral regimes."¹⁵ Sokfa John's article, "Computing Cupid: Online Dating and the Faith of Romantic Algorithms," foregrounds the power and expanse of the algorithm, a "quiet and opaque object employed to process and turn into capital the massive data that are continually generated from our digital life and practice." John explores how, using conservative theologies and algorithms, religious dating sites reinforce religiously sanctioned heteronormativity and illustrates the way in which Christian morality is implicated with technological processes. He shows how these media sites are sacralised as mediators and facilitators of holy plans for romantic relationships. As one of a handful of empirical studies of social and digital media in South Africa which employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches, John's study is particularly valuable for its fresh methodological insights.

¹⁵ Katrien Pype and Alessandro Jedlowski, "Anthropological Approaches to Media in Africa," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Africa*, eds. Roy R. Grinker, Stephen C. Lubkemann, Christopher B. Steiner and Euclides Gonçalves (Wiley Online, 2019), 360.

Siyabulela Tonono's contribution, "Uyajola 9/9 uTata'kho: Missionaries and Black Masculinities," seeks to highlight the relationship between contemporary depictions of black masculinity featured on direct broadcast satellite service television and nineteenth-century missionary depictions thereof. He engages the content of two programmes, Uyajola 9/9 and UTata'kho, that respectively seek to expose cheating lovers and negligent fathers through the plots of programmes. These programmes explore how black men are caricatured as hypersexual, criminal, and irresponsible. Set against the background of the decolonial theory, Tonono argues that, given the sustained popularity of direct broadcast satellite service television, as well as the pervasive presence and power of colonial Christian tropes in African societies, this older form of media's ability to influence public perceptions of and regard for black men should not be underestimated.

In "Gender, Religion and the Media: An Analysis of Selected Media Representations of Fungisai's Images and Music," Pauline Mateveke uses Homi Bhabha's conceptualisation of hybridity as a third space or culture to track and analyse the resistance of a female Zimbabwean gospel artist to the socially acceptable female gospel artist image. She also explores the multiple manifestations of religious power which constrict and regulate women's participation in society in general and the gospel music industry in particular. Through exploring Fungisai's identity expressions on various media platforms, Mateveke argues that Fungisai is able to navigate these systems by adopting a hybrid self which contests religious and gender norms, allowing her to "mock and destabilise the systems that attempt to control her."

Cherry Muslim's contribution "Shifting Dynamics of Safe Spaces for Women in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Egypt: A Reflection on the Article, 'We are not Women, We are Egyptians'," considers how, during intense moments of political unity, gender norms for women were temporarily suspended and then abruptly reinstated. Muslim explores the limitations of "online" activism and its repercussions for "offline" intersections in a heavily censored regime. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's concept of subversive piety, she argues that cyber-feminism is an alternative space wherein women are able to experience limited safety from male violence, while being able to practise the power of political voice.

Conclusion

This volume brings together a collection of articles that address the ways in which gender as lived experience, theoretical framework, and analytical device, is involved in a number of complex relationships with religion and media. However, the utility of gender theories, concepts, research approaches, and methodology, particularly those emerging from the African context, have been under-researched. This volume showcases contributions that critically engage and contest the epistemological and contextual sensibilities of the field of religion and media and offers guidance into the kinds of future research topics and contexts, especially those which nuance understandings of gender and contest dominant heteronormative tropes, which are necessary to further advance the field. It is our hope that this volume will be the first of many to focus on the topic of religion, media, and gender in Africa.

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