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CRADLING  
ABUNDANCE

*One African Christian's Story of Empowering  
Women and Fighting Systemic Poverty*

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STUDY GUIDE



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Stories like Maman Monique's are bridges between peoples of different places and cultures. They open doors to see neighbors in Africa as people very much like ourselves. The friends and acquaintances Maman Monique brings with her also invite us to appreciate the wonderful diversity that is found among African women. There are many things they have in common. Their lives and experiences also vary in subtle or significant ways.

This study guide aims to summarize some of the critical clusters of concepts and practices that shape the lives and choices of Congolese girls and women, and thus to problematize any simplistic assumptions about our African sisters.

The main topics that come immediately to view in Maman Monique's story are family and marriage customs, definitions of and possibilities for education, economic and social conditions, gender traditions and women's initiatives, and religion and spirituality. All of these are intertwined, but the following sketch highlights each aspect in turn.

Each section concludes with two sets of questions: (1) text questions about the book and (2) more general reflection questions. For the text questions, the general index in the book will be a helpful resource.

***Family, kin groups, and marriage practices*** play such fundamental roles in Congolese life that almost everything else in a woman's life can be traced back to the influence of her birth. Families provide meaning and security; they determine to a large degree what a girl can do and be; they define her place in the world.

"Birth families" are usually quite large, but in addition, to say "family" is almost always to speak of the extended connectional system. Most Congolese cultures are patriarchal, so the father or husband or other male relative in charge exercises decisive power. After the father's death, the eldest brother is responsible for all of his siblings and their families.

#### *Text questions*

1. What are the range and variety of experiences of women in this book with regard to family situation and marriage?
2. How do the following examples demonstrate or provide variations on this theme?

Bitota Rosalie Bitshilualua (pp. 28-30); Henriette Nzeyi Kibadi (pp. 183-84); Jeannette Adiyio (p. 186); Mado Ngombe Mukala (pp. 76-78); Marie Balengela (p. 73); Mianda Ernestine Kashala (pp. 189-90); Odette Kalanga (pp. 134-35); Pauline Mfulu (p. 124); childless elderly widows (pp. 86, 91); Ephrasie (pp. 181-82); Ygette (p. 135).

### *Reflection questions*

Families are part of everyone's experience. Sometimes they are wonderful, sometimes dysfunctional, often a mix of both. In the present day, definitions of family are changing and contested.

1. What do you see as the strengths of the African family system?
2. What do you consider its disadvantages?
3. How does the variety of circumstances of different women and girls cast light on the subject "Congolese women's experience of family"?

**Education** is almost as important as family in the life circumstances of girls in Congo. The coming of Western ideas of literacy changed the basis for determining what is an economically and socially necessary form of education. In addition, education in Congo is a complicated thing, conditioned by many other factors such as geography, gender, age, and economic situation, since until 2020 there were no free public schools.

### *Text questions*

Consider the educational opportunities for other women, such as Agnes Anekumba, Antoinette Muleka, Marie Balengela, Marie-Jeanne Kapinga, Maman Mesu, Mianda Ernestine Kashala, and Makongolo Dina.

1. How did their locations in time and space affect what was available or possible?
2. How was their education affected by language?

### *Reflection questions*

Some aspects of the availability of education for girls in Congo may seem foreign, but others probably sound quite familiar.

1. Can you identify some things that sound strange and some you might see in the United States?
2. Does any of this parallel the experiences of women in earlier North American history?
3. How might you advise someone who wanted to help improve education for girls and women in Congo?

***Economic issues, poverty, and work.*** Virtually all Congolese women work from the time they are small girls. As Maman Monique demonstrates, it is possible for a woman to support her family. However, economic challenges are the lot of almost all Congolese women, and there are different kinds and degrees of poverty. Even many of those who have enough to eat and wear struggle with any extraordinary expense, such as paying the dowry-marriage obligations for a family member, hospitalization, or death. Many others cannot feed themselves or their families.

*Text questions*

1. What different means of self-support are practiced by Congolese women?
2. How are these related to their location (rural or urban) or education (kind and level)?
3. What are some of the challenges that girls and women face in trying to earn a living and feed their children?
4. What kinds of things has Maman Monique done to address these issues?

*Reflection questions*

1. Are any of these circumstances of women's economic challenges a surprise to you?
2. What have you seen around you that is analogous?
3. What specific factors seem to you the most important in determining whether a woman can earn a living with dignity?
4. What kinds of compromises might you be willing to make to eat and to feed your children?

***Gender*** is interwoven with all aspects of life, and for Congolese women it is mostly to their disadvantage. In a patriarchal context, girls are less desirable than boys and often suffer various kinds of discrimination, and women are proportionally poorer and less educated.

*Text questions*

1. Can you construct a picture of gender relationships found in this book?
2. Is it a single picture, or do you find a range of experiences?
3. Who are some of the strong and creative women in this story who defied gender norms and usually suffered attacks?

4. What kinds of advantages or resources did they have or use?

*Reflection questions*

1. What aspects of gender relations seen in this book do you recognize from your own experience or things you have observed in North America?
2. What things seem strange to you?
3. Do the latter make sense in the context of what else you know or have read about Congolese society?
4. Does some of what you have learned suggest ways you can help other women?

***Spiritual life and ministry.*** Perhaps the most significant point about African spirituality is its pervasive character—it permeates the whole of life. For Maman Monique, her Christian faith is not just her confession or her commitment; it is her life. A second and equally critical factor is the corporate nature of life, including religious life, and the centrality of the community and communal experience.

*Text questions*

1. What are some of the ways that you have seen women express their faith in this story?
2. What specific kinds of ministry do women do, both in formal church life and in their daily lives?
3. How are worship and prayer, learning and serving, related in this vision of Christian life?
4. Can you name some of the ways that women work together, rely on each other, or define their roles according to community values?
5. What is the role of common experience in developing community? (Hint: Notice how Maman Monique describes the relationship between Christian and Muslim women, pp. 145-46, and between Congolese and Rwandans, pp. 148-49.)

*Reflection questions*

Some ways that Congolese Christians express their faith sound very familiar.

1. What parallels do you see between Maman Monique's world and your own religious experience?
2. What differences do you see?

3. How would you describe the effect of Maman Monique's life on the people around her?
4. How would you describe the effect of her story on your own understanding of faith?

### **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

See also notes 2-6 in chapter one.

#### ***Family and marriage***

Kabonde, Mulambya P. "Widowhood in Zambia: The Effects of Ritual." In *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 195-203. Nairobi, Kenya: Acton, 1996.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. "Interpreting Old Testament Polygamy Through African Eyes." In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, 87-100. Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 2006.

Maluma, Edna. "Abundant Life for Women and Children?" In *Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak*, edited by M. S. Larom, 57-62. New York: Friendship Press, 1994.

Nasimiyu-Wasike, Anne. "Polygamy: A Feminist Critique." In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, 101-18. Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 2006.

#### ***Health and HIV/AIDS***

Chrongoma, Sophia. "Women, Poverty, and HIV in Zimbabwe." In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, edited by Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 173-86. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.

Dube, Musa. "Grant Me Justice: Toward Gender-Sensitive Multi-sectoral HIV/AIDS Readings of the Bible." In *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, edited by Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, 5-24. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004.

Moyo, Fulata Lusungu. "Navigating Experiences of Healing: A Narrative Theology of Eschatological Hope as Healing." In *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, edited by Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, 243-57. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.

Nadar, Sarojini. "'Barak God and Die!' Women, HIV and a Theology of Suffering." In *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, edited by Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, 60-79. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004.

### ***Religion and women's ministries***

Dube, Musa. "'Woman, What Have I to Do With You?' A Post-Colonial Feminist Theological Reflection on the Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction." In *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Ogbu U. Kalu, 244-58. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.

Kanyoro, Musimbi. "God Calls to Ministry: An Inclusive Hospitality." In *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, 149-60. Nairobi, Kenya: Acton, 1996.

Kuma, Afua. *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*. Translated by Jon Kirby, SVD. Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1981.

Njoroge, Nyambura J. "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians." In *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Ogbu U. Kalu, 389-407. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. "Women and Ritual in Africa." In *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, 67-89. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.

### ***Autobiographies and biographies of Christian women in Central Africa***

Chipenda, Eva de Carvalho. *The Visitor: An African Woman's Story of Travel and Discovery*. Geneva: WCC, 1996. [a generation older than Maman Monique, born in Angola]

Keener, Craig, and Médine Moussounga Keener. *Impossible Love: The True Story of an African Civil War, Miracles, and Hope Against All Odds*. Minneapolis: Chosen, 2016. [contemporary, born in Congo-Brazzaville]

Otene, Matungulu, SJ. *The Spiritual Journey of Anuarite*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998. [born about 1939, Roman Catholic nun martyred in the civil wars in Congo-Kinshasa, December 1, 1964]

### ***Other resources***

Barstow, A. L., ed. *War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000.

Landman, Christina, ed. *Digging Up Our Foremothers: Stories of Women in Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1996.

Oduyoye, Mercy A. *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.

Oduyoye, Mercy A. *Who Will Roll Away the Stone? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*. Geneva: WCC/Risk, 1990.

Phiri, Isabel A., Dorothy B. Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, eds. *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 2002.

There are other useful articles in the books listed above in addition to the ones cited.