

**39** BiAS - Bible in Africa Studies  
Exploring Religion in Africa 13

Seyram B. Amenyedzi, Yosi Apollos Maton,  
Marceline L. Yele (Eds.)

## SANKOFA

Liberation Theologies of West African Women  
(Circle Jubilee Volume 1)



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Bibel-in-Afrika-Studien

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Volume 39

Exploring Religion in Africa 13

edited by  
Joachim Kügler,  
Kudzai Biri, Ezra Chitando, Rosinah Gabaitse, Kathrin Gies,  
Masiwa R. Gunda, Johanna Stiebert, Lovemore Togarasei



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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der  
deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im  
Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de/> abrufbar.

Dieses Werk ist als freie Onlineversion über das Forschungsinformationssystem (FIS; <https://fis.uni-bamberg.de>) der Universität Bamberg erreichbar.  
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Herstellung und Druck: docupoint, Magdeburg  
Umschlaggestaltung: University of Bamberg Press  
Umschlaggraphik: Joaquín Saúl Morán Macas  
Deco-Graphiken: Joachim Kügler  
Text-Formatierung: Irene Loch, Joachim Kügler

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<https://www.uni-bamberg.de/ubp/>

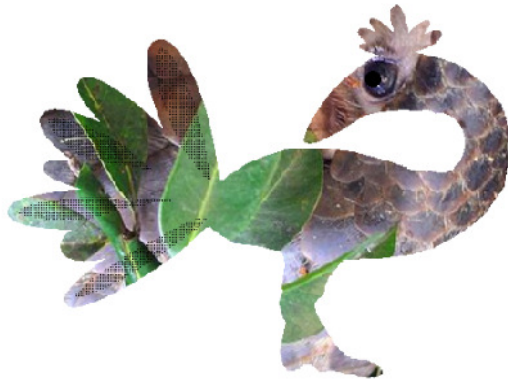
ISSN: 2190-4944 (Print)                      eISSN: 2750-0179 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-3-86309-963-3 (Print)            eISBN: 978-3-86309-964-0 (Online)

URN: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-914005  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20378/irb-91400>

*Dedicated to*

**DR. RABIATU DEINYO AMMAH**

*A founding member  
of the Circle of  
Concerned African Women Theologians*





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It takes a village to raise a child and this project had its own supportive village, who deserve our acknowledgement and gratitude.

The editors are grateful to the Circle coordinator, Prof Musa W. Dube, who provides academic leadership to the whole Circle and often functions as its principal investigator. Accordingly, she was the initiator of this book project, which she initiated in preparation of the Sankofa 2024 conference, which will be held in Legon Ghana in July 1-5, 2024. Prof Dube wrote the call for papers for this project, identified its editors and writers. She trained the editors, reviewed all the abstracts with us and produced a review guideline for the full papers. She was also an ever-present consultant on various challenges that arose throughout the year of the project. We are grateful for her academic leadership and mentorship. We emerge empowered to provide academic leadership to the whole Circle.

We also want to thank the West African Regional Coordinator Mrs. Joyce Boham for her ever-present support throughout the project. It is worthy to note our profound gratitude to the following coordinators: Rev Dr Fifame Fidèle Houssou Gandonou, Francophone West Africa; Hajia Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu, Ghana; Dr Mrs Gloria Anyantayo, Nigeria; Rev Mairo Haptu, Northern Nigeria; Rev Dr Mrs Tabe Jennet Otob Epse Benoni-Wang, Cameroon; We are grateful to many other members of the Circle for their contributions towards the success of this book.

Many reviewers contributed toward the quality of this book; we are grateful for their diligent feedback, which has shaped the process of writing the chapters presented herein. In as much as the great idea was birthed to produce such a volume, it would not be actualized without the hard work of the authors. They wrote under very difficult conditions as it was not easy to have access to resources, which were mostly written in hard copy. Their hard work has paid off, thank you!

We cannot thank the Matriarchs of the Circle enough. It is their resilience and the will to arise above the oppression and subjugations African women have experienced over the years in the society at large and religious communities that has brought us this far. In this book is the re-

echoing of their prophetic voices in the wilderness, while we journey to the Promised Land, a place where there is liberation for women. Without such voices, there would not be any such volume in hand.

Our profound thanks also go to Prof. Dr. Joachim Kügler and the entire editorial board of BiAS/ ERA for accepting this book as a volume of their series, and we say thanks also to the publisher University of Bamberg Press for making this book a reality.

Above all, we are most grateful to the Almighty God for the grace and resources we continue to receive.

*The editors*

## FOREWORD

### Tracing the Footsteps of Eku and Nwanyeruwa to Women's War of Liberation

*Musa W. Dube*

In their article, “The Christ for African Women,” Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah tell the story of Eku, a woman leader of the Akan. She led her people, fleeing the enemy during the war time. The enemy sometimes poisoned the water. Arriving at a water point, a tired and thirsty people, were afraid to drink water lest they fell into the enemies’ trap. Eku tasted the water on behalf of the people, and they watched her for a while to be sure that she will survive. When Eku did not die, people knew that they had been saved by their leader, who took the risk of dying for them. In this story Oduyoye and Amoah present Eku as playing the role of a savior, a Christ. This contextual and feminist Christological construction is radical for it presents Jesus as both black and female. In her books, *Male Daughters and Female Husbands*; and *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, anthropologist Ifi Amadiume fieldwork-based research has shown how western anthropologists-imposed dualism and hierarchical gender structures on west African cultures, that constructed its gender in a flexible and inclusive way—not relegating women to powerlessness nor to the private space. She documents how West African cultures constructed women as traders, who owned the marketplace, where man could only engage women as agents if they wanted to sell anything (think of malls and the stock market as 100% female space!).

Amadiume shows how Western colonial agents and structures conspired to coup African women from their social space into sub-ordinates of their male counterpart. The colonization of Africa was also a process of its patriarchization. This sad fiat was accomplished, not only through patriarchal writings of western anthropologists and missionaries, but also through the introduction of schools and churches, which promoted male

leadership and jobs, while denigrating cultural spirituality (Goddesses) that empowered women to excel in their public roles as farmers and traders. As Amadiume records, Nigerian women, under the leadership of Nwanyeruwa, went to war in 1929. They were fighting for their rights to be African women. This West African theological volume seeks to trace the footsteps of Eku and Nwanyeruwa in the quest for liberation. The act of retracing Eku and Nwanyeruwa's footsteps is a process of reclaiming African women's space. It is to undertake a war of liberation against patriarchy and colonial knowledge systems that have subjugated African women. It calls for a new feminist theory of analysis for African women.

This volume, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, is one of the three regional volumes commissioned in preparation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (henceforth Circle) return to its place of birth in July 1-5, 2024. The volumes rose within the context of preparing to produce biographies of the founding members of the Circle, when more members of the Circle expressed interest to write than the volume on *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers* could accommodate them. Regional volumes, exploring theologies generated by African women scholars, thus came into being, using one call for papers, which was regional specific and which has now constituted the foreword for each volume. The three regional volumes focus on exploring South, East/Central and West African women's liberation theologies generated since the launch of the Circle in 1989.

These volumes are:

- *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, edited by Seyram B. Amenyedzi, Yosi A. Maton, and Marceline L. Yele;
- *Queen of Sheba: East and Central African Theologies of Liberation*, edited by Loreen Maseno, Esther Mombo, Muke Najagu and Veronica K. Kahindo;
- *Nehanda: Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa*, edited by Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Gabaitse, Dorothy Tembo, and Fundiswa Kobo.

In addition to three regional volumes, the idea of producing thematic volumes was also birthed. The Circle thus commissioned continent and diaspora wide thematic volumes, focusing on ethics, philosophies, African Indigenous Religions, legendary African women, and Earth in African

women's literature. The Circle also launched a creative writing volume, to engage its non-academic members and audiences on current environmental challenges, facing Mother Earth. All the volumes mark the journey back to Ghana, within which *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* is located.

## **Background to Sankofa 2024 Journeys**

In 1989, 69 African women gathered at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. She had spent more than a decade searching for women in religion or theology, be it in the academy, the faith spaces, or both. Oduyoye had noticed that while women were dominant members in religious gatherings and cultural practices, there were hardly there in the leadership of faith institutions and academic departments of religion. African archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, professors, and academic Doctor of Religion were largely men. The absence of women from both the academic theological space and the leadership space of believers had consequences on the lives of women and female children. Male-generated interpretations of cultures and scriptures were often used to oppress, exploit, and keep women as sub-ordinated and second-class citizens in their families, communities and nations. An International Committee of eight chaired by Mercy A. Oduyoye and consisting of Betty Ekeya (Kenya); Rosemary Edet (Nigeria), Sr Bernadette Mbuy Beya (DRC), Elizabeth Amoah (Ghana), Brigalia Bam (South Africa); Rose Zoe Obianga (Cameroon) and Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya) assisted with planning for the conference in 1988 (Kanyoro, 2012:22).

Oduyoye and the planning committee thus gathered 69 African women from almost every African country (where they could be found) and from all religions and cultures to challenge this scenario. Sisters from the African diaspora were also invited. It was a launch of a transformative African female intelligentsia space with a clear agenda. The quest was to generate cultural and religious-based interpretations that embrace and empower all genders. Women from all religions and cultures were thus invited to enter the space of researching, reading, interpretation and re-interpreting the cultural/scriptural texts with the purpose of interrogating

and exposing oppressive aspects, as well as to generate liberating interpretations that affirm all members of the Earth Community. The Circle was thus launched in 1989 with a clear agenda for women to research, read, interpret, write, and publish in the area of cultural/religious texts for the liberation and empowerment of women in particular, and the whole Earth Community overall. Since women in religion were seriously lacking, mentoring became an important strategy for building the capacity of African women in the academy and in leadership of faith-related institutions.

The first research period (1989-2002) of the Circle was characterized by building its capacity and interrogating how religions/cultures construct and impact women, as well as finding ways of re-interpreting religions for the empowerment of women. In the second research period (2002-2019) the Circle focused on religions/theology/cultures and HIV&AIDS, as well as capacitating Faith-Based Communities for a constructive response, given the gravity of the HIV&AIDS epidemic on the African continent, and to African women and children, in particular. At its recent Africa-wide conference (July 2019), the Circle decided to adopt the theme of *Religions/Theology/Culture, the Environment and Sustainable Development Goals*. This theme was building on the conference theme; namely, Mother Africa: Mother Earth and Religion/Theology/Ethics/Philosophy. Eight volumes co-edited from the conference proceedings, are listed in the reference below.

It needs to be mentioned here that Covid 19, which appeared in the global community by the end of 2019, was unforeseen, unplanned for and a major disruption and health threat to African women, people and the world at large. The adopted theme of the Circle was not only put on a halt by Covid 19, but the Circle also had to apply itself to a new critical context and its impact on women. Towards this end three books were embarked; two of which were published (Hadebe, et al., 2021 & Labeodan, et al., 2021) while the third one is still forthcoming. Notably the huge and shocking impact of Covid 19 has come to shape the research focus of the Circle, for the executive committee decided that the theme for the forthcoming conference in Ghana will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion*.

## **Sankofa 2024: Thirty-five Years Later**

In July 2024, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians continental conference will therefore, return to Legon, Ghana, where the Circle was first launched in 1989. In accordance the 2019 chosen theme and the impact of Covid 19, research focus will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender and Religion*. This will be the first return of the whole Circle to its birthplace since the 1989 launch. Dubbed *Sankofa 2024*, the return will be an intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage to reconnect and recommit ourselves to our quest for justice-oriented knowledges and communities. Sankofa is a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol represented by a bird stretching its neck back to groom its tail. “The Sankofa symbolizes people’s quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, intelligent and patient investigation. It is this wisdom in learning from the past which ensures a strong future.” In preparation for this return, the Circle seeks to carry a comprehensive (in depth and thorough) assessment of what the founding members and their handmaidens achieved since 1989 in order to map the way forward. The term handmaidens here refer to those African women theologians and faith leaders, who did not make it to the 1989 launch meeting, who nonetheless received and implemented the vision of the Circle with vigor in its first two decades.

This volume, therefore, sought to research, analyze, map, interpret, re-interpret, expand, and theorize, among others, the theological works, ideas, and perspectives produced by the founding matriarchs and the handmaidens of the Circle: What kinds of interpretations and theologies of liberation did they generate? What sources did they use? What kinds of theories did they generate? How were their theologies of liberation constructed? What kind of Christology/ies, ecclesiology/s or missiological models did they propose? What hermeneutics did they generate and utilize? What has been the impact of the theological/ethical/philosophical ideas that they generated? How did they impact faith and the academic spaces? What pedagogical techniques did they generate and employ? What was the distinct contribution of the Founding Matriarchs and their Handmaids to the world? How does the work of funding mothers and handmaidens of the Circle address patriarchy, colonialism, neocolonial-



ism, tribalism, ethnic poverty, violence, religious difference, age, sexuality, and disability in their constructions of liberating theologies? Papers in this volume seek to address some of these questions, by engaging each author to focus on a particular theologian's work.

Unlike the short papers for the biographies volume, *Mothering African Women's Theologies: The Stories of Our Circle Pioneers*, the three regional volumes sought longer papers that enable deeper analysis to highlight the contributions of individual theologians and faith leaders. This volume therefore focuses on those women who made theological contributions through their research and publications or provided leadership in faith-related and ecumenical spaces. It does not seek to cover all women theologians; rather, it features those whose theological contributions are especially significant. The aim of this volume, therefore, is to make sure that by the July 2024 Ghana gathering regional contributions have been researched and published to map the way forward. Given this background, the statement of the problem, goals, specific objectives and research questions of this regional volume (which are the same as other regional volumes) are stated below.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Whereas in 1989, African women launched the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, seeking to develop a theology that flies with two healthy wings, up to now, the Circle has not carried a comprehensive analysis of the theology/ies produced by African women. The Circle, up to now, has not comprehensively asked evaluative questions, but it is now the agenda of this volume (and its sister volumes) to ask the following questions: How was a theology of two wings produced? What did it seek to do? How does it fly with two wholistic wings, better than other alternatives? How has it contributed to the African male-dominated theologies, feminist theologies, and theologies of the Global South? What, in other words, are the effects, achievements, strengths, and weakness of African women theologies of liberation?

## **Goal**

The volume, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* seeks to thoroughly investigate the theology/ies generated by the Circle matriarchs of West Africa and how they contributed towards theologies of liberation in the region, continent, and the world by focusing closely and analytically upon each theologian's work. In so doing, this volume becomes an important part of mapping an African feminist liberative historiography in theology.

## **Specific Objectives**

*Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* (through its authors) seeks to deeply research theological ideas produced by significant theological matriarchs of West Africa by:

1. Investigating the historical/cultural/economic/religious **contexts** that motivated their work.
2. Highlighting the **sources**, they used to generate their theological ideas (stories? scriptures? cultures?).
3. Discussing specific features and **uniqueness** of the theology of a particular matriarch.
4. Discussing the **purpose** of the Matriarch's generated theological thinking.
5. Investigating how the proposed theology **addresses** patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism, tribalism, sexual and disability-based discrimination among other social factors.
6. Analyzing how the Matriarch's theology **converses** with (a) African male theologians, (b) Global South theologies, and (c) Western feminist theologians.
7. Highlighting each essay's **main strength and contribution** to the world of knowledge and liberation.
8. Discerning its **potential applications** to the future world and work.

## Research Questions

To meet the above goal and its specific objectives, the volume *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* seeks (through its authors) to address the following research questions:

1. What were the theological **contexts** that informed this theological Matriarch's work?
2. What are the theological **sources** used by this matriarchal work (personal narratives? Scriptures? Culture)?
3. What are the particular **characteristics/themes** of this particular Matriarch's theology?
4. What is the purpose of her **theology**, and what does it seek to achieve?
5. How do her theological ideas **challenge and transform** patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, tribalism, agism, sexual and dis/ability-based discrimination etc.?
6. How does this theology **converse** with African male theologians and Western feminist theologians?
7. What are the main **strengths and contributions** of this theology to the larger world of knowledge?
8. How is the theology generated **applicable** to our future world and work?

## Conclusion

The *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* volume is in the same family as some of the earlier books of the Circle such as Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women Theologies* (2001); Nyambura Njoroge and Musa W. Dube eds., *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African* (2001); Susan Rackozy, *In her Name: Women Doing Theology* (2004) among others. Yet this volume is unique in the sense that 35 years since African women's theology was officially launched in Ghana, the best that was produced during these decades is being analyzed and presented to the world, as well as pointing to the future (Yafeh-Deigh, 2021). The book also belongs to the same league with African male theological books such as:

Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (2009); Benezet Bujo & Ilunga Muya eds., *African Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (2005) which are notable for ignoring African women's voices in the theological arena. *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women*, on the other hand, factors both inculturation and black liberation theologies while bringing in gender, race, class, sexuality, diaspora, health, Earth and postcoloniality to present a more inclusive and more social-justice responsive African theology.

Within the global context, *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* finds great company among such books as: Stephanie. Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*; Mary McClintock and Sheila Briggs, *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (2011); Kwok Pui Lan *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (2000); Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (2001); and Maria P. Aquino's, Daisy Machado and Jeanette Rodriguez's, *Religion and Justice: A Reader in Feminist Theology* (2002) among others. The volume, in other words, will be most welcome among Western, Asian and Latin American feminist and womanist liberation theologians. Its place in various theological families should render it a markable addition to the various readers in the whole Global South and the western world. Many students and libraries should find this a useful book for their classes and research.

Lastly, the volume *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* recognizes the cultural theological roots of west African landscape and seeks to celebrate the founding matriarchs and handmaidens of the region and to map the way forward. While this preface maps out the broad agenda of the Sankofa 2024 volumes, the editors through their introduction and the individual chapters will tell the story of the road covered in this journey from 1989 to the Sankofa 2024 pilgrimage and beyond. Through analyzing the various chapters, the editors' introduction will map for us themes, methods, theories, major contributions, strengths, weaknesses, and gaps gleaned from the theological feminist historiography of West Africa. Their introduction will highlight how the goal, specific objectives and the research questions are addressed by the volume. In so doing, they will point the whole Circle to the areas that need further consolidation and new explorations.

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# INTRODUCTION

## West African Women Doing Theology that Liberates from Oppression

*Seyram B. Amenyedzi*

This book *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* is among a series of publications by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) through the initiative of Prof Musa Dube the current coordinator to mark the *Sankofa* conference in Ghana in July 2024. A home coming after over three decades since the inception of the Circle, home, because Ghana is where it all started in 1989. Moreover, Mercy Oduyoye the founder of the Circle hails from Ghana and is currently residing in Ghana after worldwide missions that was dedicated to the liberation of African women and many more.

Liberation theologies of the Matriarchs of the Circle and other relevant voices in West Africa and beyond who wrote to address issues that confronted and still confront women in West Africa are presented in this volume. The general context and particularly the socio-cultural and religious context, then and now, in Western Africa has not favored women. One may argue that recently, there are women occupying various prominent spaces and positions in society, however gender-based discrimination, oppression and subjugation still linger. This volume seeks to identify and appreciate outstanding West African women theologians and their significant contributions in shaping liberation theologies and ideologies.

### Sankofa

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in July 2024 will have its Pan-African conference in Ghana, where it all started. The conference theme will be *Sankofa 2024: Earth, Pandemics, Gender, and Religion*. The Sankofa 2024 conference hopes to be a gathering of our founding mothers and following generations of African women theologians



who have kept the torch burning and have striven amidst great accomplishments and challenges. It promises to be an intellectual and social interactions and engagements along the issues that have confronted women in the society at large, the church, Islamic and African religious and cultural contexts from the time the Circle was started till now and the way forward. This volume gives a glimpse of what is expected to take place.

Sankofa is an *Adinkra* symbol and concept in the Akan culture in Ghana signifying the importance of learning from the past to build a better future. Why *Sankofa*? Although West African cultures originally have patriarchal systems, it is also established that colonialism, Christianity, and Islam exacerbated the situation. Ifi Amadiume (1987, 2015) reported from her ethnographic research among the Igbos of Nigeria that women comfortably held positions of power in the society economically, politically, socially, and religiously until the advent of colonial rule and Christianity, which began to entrench patriarchal notions and engendered roles leading to the oppression and subjugation of women.

Moreover, the significant roles queen mothers play in our cultures, priestesses in African Religions and the place of women in matrilineal heritage show that, after all, women hold positions of power in the traditional settings aside the biological roles of motherhood, wifehood, and servitude. Women have unreservedly contributed to the sustenance of families, churches, and society at large but usually unacknowledged. Imagine a community without a woman! The prophetic voices of Mercy Oduyoye and other Matriarchs in West Africa have been the voices in the wilderness proclaiming redemption for African women. The approach has been from the onset to call the church to account in solidarity with women in ending the sin of oppression (Oduyoye, 1986, 1990, 2002; Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992; Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Amenyedzi, 2021). Sankofa is the call to turn back to appreciate the significant roles African women play politically, economically, spiritually, and socio-culturally. This can only enhance the full inclusion and participation of women in the society.

Oduyoye (2002) asserts that the absence of God brings disorder and chaos including oppression. In other words, the presence of God (God-Talk) brings liberation. God has been portrayed as a male who seem to

endorse the oppression and subjugation of women. However, most African women experience God differently; we experience God as one that loves us and redeems us from oppression through salvation in Christ and creation. Biblically we understand that, when God created humankind, God created them as male and female (in God's image hence we are equal image bearers of God, and co-managers of God's economy (Oduyoye, 2002). From this perspective when we say *Sankofa*, we are just going back to creation to reclaim our identity as African women created in God's image and endowed with all the abilities to excel in whatever we do.

The book is a reprisal of the liberation theologies of the mothers who have fought through their writings for the liberation of African women. They have touched on different aspects of the lived experiences of African women ranging from spirituality, political, economic, health, violence among other situations women encountered. The Matriarchs represented in this book are West African women who belong to the Circle or not but have contributed significantly to shaping theologies that concerns African women in the contexts of Christianity, African Religions, and Islam.

### **The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle), West Africa**

The Circle was formed by Mercy Oduyoye in the 1980s. It is believed that she had started gathering African women theologians dated back to the 1970s (Kanyoro, 2006). It was at a time that it was almost a taboo for a woman to be seen in the theological scene. Theology then was a man-thing and now remains a male dominated field, however, it is seriously challenged. As a female theologian in academia in West Africa (to be precise in Ghana where she comes from and then in Nigeria her matrimonial home) who also rose to prominent positions and networks globally at the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), her influence was significant in the formation and sustenance of the Circle (Kanyoro, 2006; Russell, 2006; Oredein, 2016).

African women who were in religion and theology decided to embark on a journey of academic research and publication as a means to voice their quest for liberation from the society and religious settings which in

fact encompassed all facets of womanhood as religion and culture are enshrined in the African livelihood. Martha Frederiks (2003) identified the focus of the Circle in the 1980's on religion and culture at the time when inculturation theology was becoming popular. Although these women affirmed the need for contextualization, it was also evident that culture was gender biased hence the need for a feminist discourse even within contextualization and inculturation. African women employed methodologies, philosophies, and frameworks such as storytelling, which was very relevant in telling the experiences of women, gender, gospel and culture, gospel and justice, and cultural hermeneutics, among others in framing their liberation theologies.

Among the African women theologians founding members were those from West Africa. These included Elizabeth Amoah, Rosemary Edet, Rose Zoe Obianga and Mercy Oduyoye who were at the first international planning committee meeting. Rosemary Edet was teaching religion at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, she remained an active member of the Circle till her demise in 1993; Elizabeth Amoah was teaching religion at the University of Ghana, and Mercy Oduyoye was then the Deputy General Secretary of the WCC (Kanyoro, 2006). There are altogether 31 West African founding members of the Circle. Although they were all not part of the first international planning meeting that launched the Circle, they caught the fire and ran with it. They were instrumental in the formation and development of the African women's Circle of Theologians. One of them is Rabbiatu Ammah the first Muslim member of the Circle. She was then a lecturer at the University of Ghana; she is a founding member of the Circle to whom this volume is dedicated.

Generally, in terms of structure, the Circle has been devoid of hierarchy avoiding such titles like president, chairperson, or general secretary but a welcoming space for women theologians to connect, mentor, learn and also publish. In terms of leadership, the Circle has depended on the services of coordinators. The Circle has been an academic space from the onset but also sought to address issues that affect women at the grassroots and community engagement. The Circle does not charge membership fees, hence the members who have been at the helms of affairs have to find ways to generate funds for their activities, conferences, and publications; this remains a huge challenge. The Circle has over the years seen

emerging women theologians in Africa and there are several publications based on liberation theologies focused on African womanhood in Christianity, Islam, interrelated with African cultures and African Religions. It is worthy to note that there are men who have been in solidarity with African women theologians since the beginning until now. It is for this reason we have men theologians like Mark Aidoo and Daniel Aryeh who have also contributed to this volume and continue to support the worthy course of the Circle. This is a reflection that African women theologians are not at war but acknowledge that in the community, we need each other; hence, the voices of women cannot be ignored at any point in life.

In West Africa, Ghana precisely, a significant achievement of the Circle is the establishment of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at the Talitha Qumi Centre, Legon Ghana in 1999, which attracted many voluntary services from male and female clergy and academics in Ghana. Joyce Boham and Lily Joy were the staff members at the Institute. Joyce remains a staff at the Institute which is now passed on to the Trinity Theological Seminary where it resides. Joyce Boham was a personal assistant to the then Circle coordinator Musimbi Kanyoro, the Laison officer for the Circle and a personal assistant to Mercy Oduyoye who was then the director of the Institute. Boham's accounts on the Talitha Qumi Centre is in this volume (see Chapter Three).

## **African Women Theologies – Circle Theology**

We start with Mercy Oduyoye's answer in an interview while we seek to understand the nature of Circle theology.

**Oluwatomisin:** I've seen in your work that you identify as an African women's theologian. I've also seen in your work that you identify as an African feminist. What does it mean to be an African women's theologian? How would you describe your brand of theology?

**Mercy:** Ok, we – I'm saying "we" because by the time I got on the open market as it were – there were more of us. I was the one that decided that we would call ourselves African women theologians. Because that's the simplest – we are Africans, we are

women, and we are theologians. We were kind of off-line people. We were a minority. People were wondering “What are they doing here?” So, we wanted to state clearly that we are women, African, we are theologians. I didn’t have any of these nice words like womanist and feminist to go on. And also, it was important for us to identify ourselves as women, because the theologians in Africa – and now I’m talking the seventies, sixties to seventies – they were all men. So, we have to underline the women when we talk about African women theologians (Oredein, 2016:158)

Basically, the Circle theology is ‘African women’s theologies.’ Undoubtedly, although it is daunting to name the theologies of Circle, the bottom line is that, our theologies are focused on the liberation of African women. Oduyoye attests that when it all started, there were no fancy names like feminism or womanism. Since these terminologies have evolved over the years, we seem to clamp what we do together along the lines of feminism and womanism sometimes prefixed with African. Feminism is adjudged as Western while there have been arguments that regarding womanism, the experiences of African Americans from where womanism hails, are different from African women on the African continent (Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Kanyoro, 1995; Dube, 1996). Musa Dube the current coordinator of the Circle is famous with her postcolonial feminist hermeneutics. Masenya’s *bosadi* approach is also worthy of noting (Masenya, 1997) so is Amenyedzi’s (2022) Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm worthy of mention.

Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar have proposed that we keep the trilogy of race, gender and class while making room for formulating new methodologies that are relevant to framing our liberation theologies as African women theologians. It is important to highlight what we do in the Circle as cultural hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics, narrative activism, feminism, womanism, and employing a liberation paradigm with a commitment to the lived experiences of women at the grassroot (Oduyoye, 1995, 2002; Masenya, 1997; Dube, 2000; Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Amenyedzi, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). This volume *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* presents liberation theologies of West African women within the frameworks and approaches as mentioned above.

## Liberation Theologies of West African Women

The works of West African women usually overlap between theology, African Religions and Philosophy. Here, a highlight on the path these formidable women have traveled in shaping African women theology is presented while the chapters deal more deeply with their theologies in details.

The Circle having been a home that connects African women theologians. It has been a space for women in Christian, Muslim, and African Indigenous Religions to connect and engage intellectually and socially. History records that Christian missions did not accommodate the presence and participation of those who identified solely with African Religions. However, the Circle theologians have engaged extensively with African Religions and cultures in their theological liberation discourses, appreciating those dignifying values and denouncing the dehumanizing rituals and cultural practices that do not favor women.

**Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah** was the first Muslim woman among the founding Matriarchs (Kanyoro, 2006). Since this book is dedicated to Rabiatu Ammah, it is appropriate to start with pinpointing her immense contribution to West African 'women's liberation theology. As an Islamic scholar, her contribution has been along the lines of the trilogy of Islam, Christianity and African religion proposing a 'Women's Dialogical Model'. She stands for multi-faith and interfaith dialogue, having been an academic at the University of Ghana, her scholarship has birthed many men and women in Islamic and interfaith/interreligious theologies. In her footsteps is the current country coordinator of the Circle in Ghana, Fatimatu Neyare Sulemanu who is also an Islamic scholar at the same university.

**Mercy Oduyoye** the founder of the Circle remains the mother of African women theologians (Gathogo, 2010). Her publications since the 1970s and 1980s already explicitly tackled Christianity in Africa, the plight of young people and African women in theology, culture, and society. Among her many publications is the book *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* published in 1986, though not her first publication, this book encompasses Mercy Oduyoye's ideologies and liberation theologies. She had already by then identified patterns of coloniality, Christianization of Africa, acculturation and inculturation. Then,

as the one-woman theologian among men, it was easy to identify the notions of masculinity that informed theology, ethos and praxis, there was no room for women in such 'sacred' spaces. Women were constructed as inferior, Christianity and Islam reinforced African Indigenous Religion and culture to oppress and subjugate African women. Her theology since the onset has been one that identifies oppression as sin that needs redemption. Hence salvation through Christ must also bring liberation from oppression.

**Elizabeth Amoah**, also a founding member of the Circle has significantly contributed to the theological liberation discourse on the continent. She unreservedly casts the net of liberation abroad upon the waters of African Indigenous Religion. Her focus has been mainly on African Indigenous Religion, critiquing religious and socio-cultural systems in her quest for abundant life for all. Elizabeth Amoah approaches her liberation theologies by using oral sources such as, proverbs, songs, stories, and prayers among others. As a founding member, her immerse contributions to the Circle is worthy of acknowledgement.

**Rosemary Edet** is recognized as one of the first African Catholic Feminist Nuns focusing on a biblical theology, African tradition(s) and biblical hermeneutics. Her inculturation theology is a huge contribution to African women's liberation theology within Christianity and the traditional Nigerian culture(s). As a New Testament scholar her focus on Pauline notion of community is an impressive work which has enhanced the shaping of African women's liberation theologies. Edet had also done work on creative literature. She is particularly known for designing the logo of the Circle.

**Teresa Okure's** is also worth mentioning, her work is a major contribution to African women liberation theologies, biblical hermeneutics and praxis. Okure was the first African woman with a PhD in biblical studies. She specialized in New Testament studies, particularly in John's gospel. Writing from the Nigerian context, her primary focus has been on understanding abundant life for all as in John 10:10 while addressing marginalization and gender. Teresa Okure's hermeneutic of life is a major contribution to liberation theology and praxis (Okure, 1988, 2000).

**Dorothy BEA Akoto** is a significant African woman theologian who has made major contributions in framing African women's theology from the Old Testament and biblical studies dimensions. Theological contributions in the light of gender and women's liberation, from the perspective of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies. She addresses colonialism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, tribalism, education, culture, marginalization, and discrimination among others. Also focusing on children, marriage, widowhood, witch camps and HIV/AIDs etc. A significant book she co-edited with Elizabeth Amoah and Dorcas Akintunde is *Culture Practice and HIV and AIDS: African Women's Voice, from the presentations at the third Pan-African Circle Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2002*. Her major contribution is the "Hermeneutic of Grafting" in Hebrew studies and is recognized as the first Old Testament woman scholar in West Africa.

**Grace Sintim-Adasi** is another amazing woman theologian whose contributions undoubtedly have played a vital role in theology, praxis or ethos. Her research focuses on gender, leadership, women in ministry, hierarchies, inclusion, seclusion, and culture. Her book, *Gender and Change: Roles and Challenges of Ordained Women Ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana which was published in 2016*. Her own experiences as a minister and educationist come to bear as she addresses issues that concern women and are relevant in education.

**Oyeronke Olademo** although is not a member of the Circle, we have included her in the Matriarchs as her enormous contribution to African women theologies are very significant. Her work is on the cultural, political, religious, and economic contexts of Yoruba religion, Christianity and women. She uses oral literatures, orature, or folk literature and has significantly contributed to the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm.

In terms of philosophy some of the African women have trodden the philosophical paths in building their liberation theologies. **Celestina Omoso Isiramem** is one of such, as an African feminist philosopher, she makes philosophical-theological propositions while interrogating religions and cultures, identifying those dehumanizing aspects making a case against the sin of discrimination. She works mainly from the Nigerian context and has served as a coordinator in the Nigerian South-South Zone of the Circle.



Furthermore, is **Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere** whose focus has been on the inclusion of women, and children in all facets of life. As an African feminist philosopher, in her inclusive approach, she emphasizes patriarchy and marginalization while arguing that women and children be fully included in societal life.

The Circle West Africa, Ghana in particular has worked extensively on HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 through community engagements and publications. The book: *People of Faith and The Challenges of HIV/AIDS* edited by Mercy Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah in 2004 is an evident output. Similarly, the recent publication on the COVID-19 pandemic: *COVID-19: African Women and the Will to Survive* edited by Helen A. Labeodan, Rosemary Amenga-Etego, Johanna Stiebert and Mark S. Aidoo, is very significant.

The above-mentioned matriarchs and their liberation theologies are but a few of what African women theologians have been up to over the years, the book presents a lot more matriarchs and summaries of their liberation theologies. It is imperative to indicate that there are generations after these profound women who are following their footsteps. Many of them are the authors who have contributed tremendously towards this volume. The Circle in preparation for the future is grooming the next generation. Hence, there are the Rising Stars, these are identified up and coming African women theologians who are being mentored and they are leaving no stone unturned but striving hard in order to keep the flame burning towards liberation from oppression and women's empowerment.

A good evaluation of an organization would not ignore the weaknesses as it is in identifying them that they may be addressed. Hence, although the Circle has achieved so much in the West African region, it has not been without challenges. First of all, while we acknowledge the enormous contributions of our Matriarchs, it is observed that the fire that burned in the beginning and the unity that kept them together seem to wane. Perhaps, the older generation may have been satisfied with their achievements, however, their vibrant and continuous engagements could encourage a lot more rising stars and future generations of African women theologians.

Admittedly, theology still remains typically a man's world. Therefore, there is the need to identify, encourage and mentor a lot more women in the theological field for a greater representation. There is also the need for

the Circle in the West African Region as a whole and the individual countries to endeavor to light up the touch again, which means relentless efforts in unity and purpose in organization, fellowship, and publication.

## Overview of the Book

The book *Sankofa: Liberation Theologies of West African Women* sought to answer questions as posted in the preface by the coordinator (see preface). Mainly, the objective is to rewrite the theologies of the West African Matriarchs. In so doing we sought to investigate the contexts that motivated their work, their sources of theological ideologies, their unique theologies and how they confronted the issues of patriarchy, tribalism, colonialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, and many others socio-cultural and religious issues that affected women. The book also had the objective of interrogating some male dominant theologies vis-à-vis that of the Matriarchs. Admittedly, space did not allow for even the theologies of the Matriarchs to be exhausted, let alone compare and contrast with other male counterparts. Notwithstanding, masculine and patriarchal notions in theology, ethos and praxis were addressed. The book is divided into three sections,

- Section One: Methods and Theories of Liberation
- Section Two: Biblical Hermeneutics of Matriarchs
- Section Three: African Women Theologies of Liberation

## Section One: Methods and Theories of Liberation

The book opens with an engagement with Ifi Amadiume's ethnographic findings through an Afrocentric-Womanist lens by Seyram Amenyedzi. Amadiume in her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* which was first published in 1987 and republished later in 2015, tells the story of how Igbo women of Nigeria assumed economic, spiritual, political, and social powers until colonization and Christianity robbed them of such powers. Ifi is not a member of the Circle but her work lays a solid foundation for the theologies of African women as this provides a scientific evidence of the realities of African women especially that of the Igbo women of Nigeria.

**Chapter Two** is a reflection on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* by Gesila Nneka Uzukwu. This book is a weighty piece of work that is crafted beautifully to tell the story of patriarchy, colonialism, and sexism. A theological engagement of the relevant themes undoubtedly adds a lot more to the discourse and liberation theologies of African women.

**Chapter Three** captures a major achievement of the Circle by Joyce Ewura Adwoa Boham who has been a long-standing staff of the Circle. Joyce, the current director of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at the Talitha Qumi Centre in Legon, Ghana writes about the achievements of the institute.

In **Chapter Four**, Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh presents a review of Rabbiatu Ammah’s work on gender and justice in religion, mainly on Islam. Rabbiatu identifies interpretations and misinterpretation of Qur’anic passages that dehumanize women and reinforce patriarchal tendencies in both Arabian and African societies. She highlights gender justice and how the oppression of women also affects them economically.

**Chapter Five** is Oluwatoyin Adebola Gbadamosi’s presentation of Helen Labeodan’s philosophical propositions and theology. From the Yoruba cultural context in Nigeria, Helen’s liberation theologies are focused on interpretations and re-interpretation of African Philosophy especially metaphysics and cultural beliefs from a feminist dimension. Her work on HIV/AIDS is worthy of noting.

## **Section Two: Biblical Hermeneutics of Matriarchs**

**Chapter Six** is Caroline N. Mbonu’s appreciation and interrogation of Teresa Okure’s Biblical Hermeneutics in a Nigerian Context. She presents her contextual liberation theologies and her hermeneutical approach to issues that concerns African women particularly in the Nigerian context.

**Chapter Seven** presents the Matriarch BEA Akoto’s African Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation. Written by Agnes Acha Ifeyinwa the chapter highlights BEA Akoto’s approach and theologies on gender in the Bible that tackles marriage, missions, ministerial education, poverty, masculinity, racism and classism, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS.

In **Chapter Eight**, Marceline L. Yele writes on the Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Alice Yafeh-Deigh. Yafeh-Deigh is a Cameroonian, her liberation theologies are mainly biblical hermeneutics that are centered on culture and postcolonial tendencies that subjugate African women, particularly from the Cameroonian context.

**Chapter Nine** is a tribute in memory of the late Dorcas Akintunde and her immense contribution to African women's liberation theologies from a Nigerian context. Bolaji E. Aderonke engaged Dorcas's widower and others while framing and rewriting her theologies which are basically on feminist biblical hermeneutics.

**Chapter Ten** is Mark Aidoo's presentation of Dorothy Akoto's liberation theologies on gender from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible dimensions. He explores Dorothy Akoto's take on patriarchy, racism, colonialism, marginalization, sexism, tribalism, and discrimination among others.

### **Section Three: African Women Theologies of Liberation**

**Chapter Eleven** is a womanist retrospection of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye's liberation theologies in the Circle by Seyram Amenyedzi. As the founder of the Circle, Mercy Oduyoye was a pacesetter in identifying the oppression and subjugation of African women in socio-cultural and theological settings. Mercy remains an untamed prophetic voice in Africa and beyond.

In **Chapter Twelve**, Estelle M. Sogbou pays a tribute to the late Rosemary Edet, a co-founder of the Circle who was among the first African Catholic Feminist Nuns. Her theologies and African tradition and biblical interpretations distinctly approached from theology of inculturation perspectives. Stemming from the Nigerian context, Rosemary's liberation theologies are focused on the dignity of women and colonization.

**Chapter Thirteen** is Sarah Korang Sansa's rewriting of Rose Mary Amenga-Etego's theologies. She does an analysis of her theologies that are towards addressing contemporary issues in Africa and Ghana specifically, through a theological lens.

**Chapter Fourteen** is Georgina Kwanima Boateng's account of Grace Sintim-Adasi's liberating Ecclesia. Writing from the Ghanaian context, Grace majors on inequalities in leadership and promotion in the ecclesiastical and academic spaces regarding men and women due to socio-cultural factors.

**Chapter Fifteen** is on the philosophical and feminist liberation theologies of Celestina Omoso Isiramen done by Esther Ojone Joseph. Isiramen's work delves into Yuroba traditional religion while framing her liberation theologies.

In **Chapter Sixteen**, Lydia Bosede Akande rewrites the liberation theologies of Oyeronke Olademo who also is not a member of the Circle, she is included in the Matriarchs as her enormous contribution to African women theologies is very significant. Her work is on the cultural, political, religious, and economic contexts of Yoruba religion, Christianity and women. She uses oral literatures, orature, or folk literature and has significantly contributed to the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm.

**Chapter Seventeen** is by two Cameroonian members of the Circle, Helen Namondo Linonge-Fontebo and Gertrude Kamgue Tokam who write on the theologies of H  l  ne Yinda who also comes from Cameroon. H  l  ne Yinda's work is on gender inequalities, gender-based violence, injustice and other discriminations women face in Africa from socio-cultural and Christian perspectives.

In **Chapter Eighteen**, Agnes Ini Solomon gives an account on the African pastoral bearings of Esther Acolatse. Esther comes from Ghana and her research on pastoral counseling cannot be ignored when identifying the enormous contributions of African women and their liberation theologies.

**Chapter Nineteen** is a summary of Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu's PhD research. She writes about the contributions of Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship to development in Ghana. The chapter is a research that proves that Muslim women groups have made significant strides in contributing to development in Ghana.

**Chapter Twenty** is a reflection on Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere's inclusive approach to African women studies by Blessing Okojie Jeffrey-Ebhomemen through an Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. Martina

Iyabo, in her work considers the inclusion of women, mothers, and children in all aspects of life as vital.

**Chapter Twenty-One** is the last chapter by Yosi Apollos Maton on the late Rosemary Edet's Contributions to Feminist Theology in West Africa. The late Rosemary Edet is among the founders of the Circle whose contribution to liberation theology is outstanding. Moton notes her opinion that Mary Magdalene should have been accorded apostleship for having witnessed and announced the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Finally**, the volume ends with Georgina Kwanima Boateng's beautiful poem in honor of Elizabeth Amoah, a founding member of the Circle.

In **Conclusion**, herein, this book echoes the prophetic voices of West African Matriarchs of the Circle. It is impossible to have written everything about their theologies, but we hope that the book provides enough overview of their liberation theologies. We trust that the book will be useful for the now and in the future in framing feminist/womanist theologies and African women liberation.

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# SECTION ONE

## Methods and Theories of Liberation



# 1 | ENGAGING IFI AMADIUME'S FINDINGS THROUGH AN AFROCENTRIC-WOMANIST LENS

*Seyram B. Amenyedzi*

## **Abstract**

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* requires a retrospect while framing our conversations around Christianity, gender, and sexuality in our current African societies. Her book is an ethnographical study of how sex and gender were socio-culturally constructed among the Igbo people of Nnobi town in the precolonial and colonial, and postcolonial eras. In the precolonial period, females could assume the position of male daughters with the right to inheritance and female husbands who married wives (got men for them) for more descendants and as a portrayal of power and wealth. Although women occupied such power roles within patriarchal systems that still maintained the subjugation of women and distinct roles of wifehood and motherhood, gender roles were not necessarily biologically and sexually oriented. Indigenous spirituality assigned economic space and power to women. Women had the goddess of economic success, they owned and controlled the market space. Gender was not constructed in hierarchical and dualistic manner. The narrative highlights the significant role colonialism and Christianity played in assigning particular gender roles to males, and females, and therefore silencing women as a sign of true humility and obedience to biblical teachings they received from their newfound religion. Women were ripped off their political, spiritual, and economic powers while men were empowered by colonial/Christian ideologies and education. The chapter seeks to reflect on the experiences of women in the then precolonial and colonial Nnobi society and the role Christianity plays in the suppression and liberation of women in postcolonial Africa through an Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. The Afrocentric-womanist paradigm provides a framework for researching African women in an African context.

**Keywords:** Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, Gender, Colonialism, Christianity, Womanism

## Introduction

Ifi Amadiume's book on *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, was first published in 1987 and later in 2015. Thirty-five years later, a retrospect on the book is in order, while framing our conversations around Christianity, gender, and sexuality in our current African societies. Amadiume (1987, 2015) did an ethnographic study of how the Igbo people of Nnobi town in Nigeria socio-culturally constructed sex and gender during the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. In the precolonial era, also known as the olden days, females could assume male positions of power as male daughters who bore the right to inheritance and female husbands who could marry wives (got men for them) as a symbol of power and wealth and for more descendants.

Even though patriarchal systems existed, with women occupying such typical roles as wives and mothers, gender roles were not necessarily biologically and sexually oriented. Women could assume positions of power economically, spiritually, politically and socio-culturally. It is obvious that it was the advent of colonialism and Christianity that turned the tables by assigning particular gender roles to male and female, hence, silencing women in the process as a sign of true humility and obedience to biblical teachings from their new Christian religion. Women were therefore poached from their positions of political, spiritual, and economic powers while men on the other hand were empowered by colonial/Christian education and patriarchal ideologies. The chapter seeks to reflect on the experiences of women in the then precolonial and colonial Nnobi society and the role Christianity plays in the suppression and liberation of women in postcolonial Africa through an Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. The Afrocentric-womanist paradigm is a research methodological framework for researching African women within an African context.

## Methodology: The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm

I employ the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm (Amenyedzi, 2022) as a methodological framework to guide the reflections on Ifi's work. The paradigm combines Afrocentrism and womanism to create a model that aids research on African women within the African context. The Afrocentric

research method proposes that African research is done by African people from African cultural lens (cf. Mkabela, 2005; Mazama, 2001; Asante 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991). Womanist scholars restate the fact that the experiences of African women are unique and can be lost in the larger feminist discourse, hence the need to pay particular attention to the issues of classism, sexism and racism as relating to the Black woman (cf. Walker, 1983; Gafney, 2017; Floyd-Thomas, 2010). These issues form the thrust of Ife Amadiume's book which deems this paradigm fit for such a reflection. As noted by Amenyedzi (2022:207), the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm poses six questions to guide African women's research.

These are:

1. What is the African context?
2. What are the essential components of the culture?
3. What is the theological/religious view of the woman in this context?
4. How are women appreciated in the context?
5. How does the situation in question affect the African woman?
6. What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how would that influence the appreciation of the African woman? (The focus is on both Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and/or reformed/reformulated praxis).

### **Context: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Igbo Society of Nnobi in Nigeria**

The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm commences with the question: what is the African context? The context was the then Nnobi town of Nigeria in West Africa in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. The precolonial period was pre-1900, which was also referred to as the "olden days", the colonial and postcolonial eras as the "modern days" (Amadiume, 2015:21). Pat Chapman in her foreword to the 2015 edition said:

More importantly, the book offered a new insight and understanding into the nature of sex and gender in an African society, since Amadiume demonstrates convincingly that among the Igbo of the

town of Nnobi in eastern Nigeria, gender was, at least in the pre-colonial period, not always tied to biological sex, that women could be ‘husbands’ as well as wives, and that many political roles were ascribed to both sexes (Amadiume, 2015:ix).

Nnobi town was significant in ancestral veneration and rituals. Also, due to the constant famine which was caused by soil erosions and low productivity, they were deeply involved in rituals. The inhabitants were mainly Igbo people. The people were traders who usually traded in motor parts. Women and men alike were powerful in wealth and power. The women controlled the market place and they were also farmers. It is worthy to note that despite the powerful roles women had; notwithstanding, it was a context of patrilineal inheritance where the males had full control of land and its allocation. The women however controlled the economic systems, as they were involved in local and external trade. There were sexual roles assigned to each gender, even in terms of farming; women had their own crops, likewise men.

Religiously, there was an “all embracing goddess religion above the cult of ancestors”. Socially, there were ‘matricentric units’ which had some level of autonomy. In the socio-cultural context, the appraisal of women depended on their industrial and economic achievements usually rewarded by titles. In the precolonial period, gender roles did not necessarily correspond with biological sexual roles (Amadiume, 2015:12-21).

A significant event that cannot be ignored is the impact of colonialism and Christianity on the power roles of women in the society due to biblical teachings of humility and submission and western rigid gender ideologies. In the research space, the book came at a time when anthropologists had made the west to perceive Africa as a primitive, backward and savage society and an object of research. Then, anthropological studies were characterized by ethnocentrism and racism where the British in particular assumed superior positions and worldviews as they research Africa and third world. Furthermore, it was a setting where feminism was approached from racist and imperialist ideologies (Amadiume, 2015:xi-xvi). This book then serves as an Afrocentric lens for the reportage of the realities of the Igbo people of Nnobi.

## Gender, Sexuality, Wealth, and Power in Nnobi

The second focus of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm seeks to ascertain the essential components of the culture. In this case, the focus is on the socio-cultural construction of gender, sex, and power roles in the various eras of colonialism. Amadiume's ethnographic study shows that in Nnobi town and among the Igbo people by large in the precolonial period, division of labor was influenced by sexual and gender ideologies however, there were also flexible non-biological gender constructions. Women were believed to have received and inherited from the goddess *Idemili*, the gifts of perseverance and industriousness – *idi uchu* and the pot of prosperity – *ite uba*.

The Nnobi culture had matrifocal/matricentric notions where households were organized according to mothers and their children who formed the sub-compound within the larger compound with the males in the front section of the house. These household units assigned to females were economically self-sufficient. The men normally farmed yam, which was the staple. Due to the poor fertility of the land, the farming of yam was shrouded in rituals and techniques mainly observed by the male heads of families who also had to give permission for yam to be eaten. Cocoyam was a female crop which was much easier to cultivate than yam. Yam required a lot more labour like the digging of the soil to create huge mounds to stain the yam crop from erosions and the rains. Cassava which later became a staple was farmed by women as its cultivation was not that difficult. The crops which the women farmed like cocoyam, cassava and plantain were to sustain the families during food shortage, hence, the women played significant roles in the sustenance of the family.

In Nnobi, wealth was characterized by fixed properties like land and food trees, and movable properties such as domestic animals, food, agricultural products, household goods and utensils, human labour, “especially women's productive and reproductive powers including their sexual services. Ritual knowledge and titles were also bought” (Amadiume, 2015:30). For men, their wealth was showcased by their houses, wives, and daughters (who brought in-laws), livestock, titles, yam farms and yam stores, ancestral compound, food, and cash crops. For the women, wealth meant to have livestock, dogs, fowls, farm and garden produce,

many daughters, and many wealthy and influential sons. Wealthy women could gain the *ogubuefi* title which is voluntary but reserved for both men and women who had killed a cow for their goddess *Idemili*. Wealthy women took other “involuntary titles taken only by women, and possession of wives by 'male daughters', first daughters, barren women, rich widows, wives of rich men and successful female farmers and traders, that is, the kind of women to whom I shall refer as 'female husband'” (Amadiume, 2015:31). Female and male portrayal of wealth were similar, though they possessed different items. However, it is significant to note that women did not own land. This is to say that gender roles were quite flexible in terms of economic and political power (as portrayed in the acquisition of titles and possessions). However, there were still some patriarchal notions although not as strong as it was during the colonial and postcolonial era.

Land was owned by inheritance where ancestral lands owned by patrilineages were distributed among sub-lineages and trickled down to family units. Individual land ownership was only possible if the owner was alive or had male descendants or 'male daughters' who would inherit the land after his demise. If there was no descendant to inherit the land, it was returned to the extended family, mainly the brothers of the deceased. Male daughters were daughters of men who did not have sons to inherit them, and would have called them back home from their matrimonial homes to assume the role of a son known as *nhayikwa* or *nhanye* in Nnobi custom (Amadiume, 2015:31-34). Women farmed their husbands' land and could only have continual access if they had sons or male daughters after the husband passed. Since women managed the land, when a wife died, the land was passed on to the wife of the son or the female daughter would marry a woman to take her place. Lands were normally distributed according to the number of wives or sons, land remained a constant source of dispute, murder, and mischief in *Nnobiland* as there would be scarcity and the younger generations would lack access. In Amadiume's words:

As men increased their labour force, wealth and prestige through the accumulation of wives, so also did women through the institution of 'female husbands'. When a man paid money to acquire a woman, she was called his wife. When a woman paid money to acquire another woman, this was referred to as buying a slave, *igba*

*ohu*, but the woman who was bought had the status and customary rights of a wife. With respect to the woman who bought her, who was referred to as her husband, and the 'female husband' had the same rights as a man over his wife. I therefore translate *ohu*, in the context of woman-to-woman marriage as wife. It was through this practice of marrying other women that the richest of Eze Okigbo's wives obtained their wealth (2015:46-47).

Women's wealth outweighed that of the men which also caused them to either lose or gain respect by the way they were addressed by their roles as husbands. The senior wife who was not industrious would lose the seniority role to the junior wife who was wealthy.

Stemming from their ancestral history where the first male son ruled, and had the prerogative to decide on rituals and ceremonies, this was the norm, so that in every *obi*, the most senior son in the patrilineage had the final say. Keeping in mind the fact that male daughters also had a place in this patrilineage, this makes the issue of sex and gender null and void. They operated in a hierarchical order based on seniority, while the first male (*di-okpala*) was in charge of the males, *Ada* (first daughter) was the overseer of the females. Women could assume roles assigned for males but not the other way round.

The religious structure is very significant as the people of Nnobi so revere their goddess *Idemili* who was a water spirit. Their goddess religion was also integral in their administrative, judicial and political systems where the priests and other titleholders acted as police and judges. The shrine was the sanctuary where social offenders like thieves, adulterers, debtors were summoned, and others were also sent there as gifts. Anyone who entered there apart from the priest was considered an *osu* (a social outcast or cult slave). The priest was a "female man" as he ties a wrapper like a woman, he consults with the senior *Ekwe* titled woman known as *Agba Ekwe*, who was next to the goddess in terms of hierarchy. The relevant thing to note here is that, the roles of the female and male in this context was not aligned to sex or gender. The goddess owned all the market places and therefore had shrines over there. *Agba Ekwe* held the most powerful political power in Nnobi. Also, *Idelemi's* daughter *Eno* was worshipped in Nnewi. The roles of the goddess *Idemili* and *Agba Ekwe*



denotes how womanhood was elevated in their religious and political lives.

Patrilineal daughters also assumed a lot of powerful roles especially during funerals. Another very important point to highlight is that, in Nnobi, the closest form of kinship was traced to siblings from the matri-centric unit (*umume otu afo*) children from one womb. There is also a form of recognition and reverence for the daughter's children (*nwadiana*) by her patrilineage. There was also the Women's Council, *Inyom Nnobi* (Women of Nnobi) which played a role likened to that of the magistrate's court, with the authority to rule on women's affairs. The leadership of this council was based on wealth and achievement; however, the members were those women with *Ekwe* title. Their main tasks were to ensure the welfare and safety of the women which included summoning men. They had a say in determining bride price, they would fine women who did not exhibit good conduct like stealing, gossiping and fighting in public. They enforced rules like banning sexual intercourse with nursing mothers and the spacing of children for two years. They monopolized the market place, ensured its cleaning and policing.

The Women Council's activities were not only limited to women's affairs but they also raised money to contribute to other works and repairs that concerned the public; sometimes, they demanded contributions from the entire town. The traditional leaders and men revered and feared the Women's Council. The men and women alike dreaded their meetings that were shrouded in secrecy. They would normally use mass strikes and demonstrations as their most powerful weapon, these strikes included refusal to perform domestic and sexual duties. They confronted the men for decisions and actions taken that did not favor women. Importantly,

the fact still remains that even though there was a unifying organization which safeguarded women's interests, female solidarity was neutralized, to some extent, through the division of women on the basis of gender; daughters were seen as males in relation to wives and superior in authority to wives; in this context, sex did not correspond to gender. Daughters, in alliance with their fathers and brothers, identified themselves with male interests. Nevertheless, this flexibility of gender allowed women to take on typical male roles, which gave them authority (Amadiume, 2015:67).

Just as in recent times, women's roles were typically wifehood and motherhood; they were normally married off into other lineages as marriage with close relatives from the same patrilineage was regarded as incest (although it was allowed among distant relations). Women still retained recognition in their patrilineages, even after marriage (mostly protected by their brothers) so for this reason, Nnobi people preferred marriage within the geographical vicinity. This made it easier to go back home to perform rituals and ceremonies when the need arose. If a woman's bride price/bride-wealth was not paid, the man did not have any legal right over his children, they belonged to the woman's patrilineage. Hence, the bride price was also referred to as child-wealth. Marriage ceremonies were marked by fertility rituals and ceremonies, coupled with relevant songs performed by women, this initiated her into womanhood, sexuality and motherhood.

This also signifies that women themselves expected that wives must by all means make babies (at the time the book was written, not all of the rituals as typically presented in the book were still being practiced in the same manner). Pregnancy and child naming ceremonies which included a ritual in the evil forest and a showcase of pregnancy in the market place to receive blessings were very significant. It was a taboo for women who had just delivered to work, the mother of the wife was required to come and help. The post-natal confinement was also to allow the new mother to heal. Most importantly, sex was a taboo during this period. At marriage, a wife received a piece of land from the husband which she was supposed to farm.

Death and funerals formed a relevant part of Nnobi culture, it was characterized by exchange of gifts among families. Among these rituals, it is worthy to mention that animals, mainly goats (sometimes cows depending on their wealth and affordability) were returned to the mother's patrilineage of the deceased. If a wife died, a goat was returned to her family; the first son was required to provide a goat for his mother's funeral; the first daughter's husband was also required to provide a goat for the funeral of either of the parents of the wife. If a husband died, one goat was sent to the mother's parental home, while when a wife died, two goats were sent, one to her own patrilineage and the second to her

mother's patrilineage. These all show the significance of women in the culture.

Despite the powerful roles women played, widowhood did not favor them. The men were allowed to marry soon after the burial of the wife while the woman would go through what Amadiume in her own words calls "hell-fire, *okunmuo*", very demeaning rituals (Amadiume, 2015:82). It is evident that the precolonial Igbo society of Nnobi constructed gender in flexible terms which allowed women in particular to assume male roles, they held powerful positions in the socio-cultural, religious, economic and political spheres. Moreover, it would not be long when they would be tamed by the advent of colonialism and Christianity as presented in the next section.

## **The Influence of Colonization and Christianity on Womanhood in Nnobi**

At this point, the question posed in the paradigm is: what is the theological/religious view of the woman in this context? The focus will be on how colonialism and Christianity reconstructed womanhood along rigid gender and patriarchal ideologies in *Nnobiland*. This is relevant because colonization was synonymous to Christianity. Ife recorded that in the 1900s, the invasion by the British "suppressed indigenous institutions" by imposing Christian and Western systems and ideologies on education, political administrative government, and the economy (Amadiume, 2015:119). The flexible gender systems were also replaced by strong and rigid sex, class and gender inequalities, ideologies, and systems. In fact, this is reflected in the title of the seventh chapter: Colonialism and the Erosion of Women's Power.

The women in Nnobi did not fancy this new religion, which was not favorable to them; hence, a mass protest was recorded in 1925 against colonialism; calling for a return to traditional customs. Unlike the pre-colonial era when women would have gotten their demands met by this means, the response was to send the military to ensure order and their leadership arrested. Monogamy was to replace polygamy, which was a challenge to the people.

Another contention was with the church, the titles of wealth and power both women and men acquired was a big issue. While the Catholic church in particular accepted the male titles, the female title was not even a topic for discussion. Christianity and education were put together and among the very early lessons were the condemnation of indigenous cultural ideologies and customs. They were regarded as pagan and heathen, especially the worship of the goddess *Idemili*, the notion of a female god was not acceptable, as the missionaries taught about the maleness of God: a doctrine of a patriarchal Christian God and His son Jesus Christ was the main message.

Even academics by then would attribute male characteristics to the goddess in their write-up. There were conflicts between Christians and Indigenous religion. Although Christianity was blamed for encouraging the people to disregard customs like the killing of a python, which was the totem for the goddess, and many other customs, the church became a refuge for those who were outcasts and rejected like mothers of twins, women accused of witchcraft and those with abominable diseases as leprosy.

In the colonial era, the institutions that favored women like that of *female husbands* and *male daughters* were condemned by churches, meaning converts would abandon such practices. It is significant to highlight that the *Ekwe* title which was a spiritual, socio-political and economic acknowledgment of the industriousness and achievements of women was banned. Christianity and education would not endorse the inheritance of widows by the brother with reference to the biblical text which prohibited a man from uncovering the nakedness of his brother's wife (Lev 18:8). Well, from a cultural point of view, the argument was that, this provided the woman and her children some security and sustenance. On ethical and moral grounds, this was rather liberating for the women. Amadiume observed in her ethnographic study that Christianity could not stop men from taking more wives but detested those customs that gave women some power and recognition. This was a form of bias towards women.

Overwhelming evidence shows that women in Nnobi and in Igboland in general were neither more comfortable nor more advantaged from an economic point of view under colonialism. They had lost their grip on the control of liquid cash; men had invaded the

general market, and women were becoming helpless in their personal relations with husbands. But, most important of all, pro-female institutions were being eroded both by the church and the colonial administration (Amadiume, 2015:132).

Although women formed the majority in the church, they remained the body (congregation) while the focus was on the patriarchal God, His bishops and priests who were men. These patterns were also reflected in education where the boy child was favored above the girl child, only very few girls could access education. Vocational schools also focused on the male with courses in carpentry, tailoring and printing. Men got the opportunity to train as teachers and clerks making them employable as against women. At some point in the early 1970s, even though female enrollment at schools shot up, they mostly ended at the secondary levels. The females were prepared mainly for domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, childcare and sewing. Those who made it to the university, the statistics show that the men were overwhelmingly more in many of the disciplines except for home economics which had more females, even in that, men also enrolled for hotel services. These notions of patriarchy were traced to the supposed colonizers civilized roots back in England (Amadiume, 2015:136). Henceforth, women were cut off from mainstream life, they could not easily access employment and leadership roles both in government and the church as in the precolonial era when they had so much power. Colonization and Christianity alike did not favor women in many ways.

The British forced its rule over the people of Nnobi through military expeditions as they resisted. A local government with a warrant chief system replaced indigenous political systems. The new systems and its poll tax and corruption did not settle with the people of Nnobi, there were agitations that was climaxed by the Women's War (riots) in 1929. They made an impact as they succeeded in dethroning the then warrant chief. However, their main fight was against the entire colonial administrative systems, which did not have a place for women. They were also losing grounds economically. Although there were some reforms, women were not considered but rather rigid gender ideologies were enshrined of which the men took advantage.

The colonial rule also came with the new cash economy with European firms. Even though some women were also trading, a few in the urban areas were wealthy as they served as middle women for the European firms; it was obvious that the women did not control the economy as it used to be. Significant among the shifts is the production and trade of palm oil and palm kernels which the women initially did. The abolition of the slave trade shifted the economy into the export of palm oil and kernels, which were used in manufacturing soap and margarine. There were now factories and oil mills that cracked the kernels and extracted the oil. This meant that the production moved from the family level mainly controlled by the wives to the factories. Now, husbands sold the palm directly to the mills, which blocked the monies that would have come to the wives. All these were part of the triggers of the Women's War. The women also struggled to pay their children's school fees. The women did not fight the White men directly however, every rage was towards them as demonstrated in their songs as they attacked the courts, factories, warrant chiefs and foreign goods in the market.

Polygamy was replaced by monogamy, while colonizers saw this as a form of security for wives and also offered the option for divorce, this was not appreciated by all as they valued some of the support systems they received from a wider family system. In short, during this period, the women became poorer at the expense of the men who were now wealthier both economically and ideologically including patriarchal notions.

The local government systems evolved into the Nnobi Welfare Organization (NWO), which did not include any woman at the initial stages but considered the representation of the Women's Council later on (this was a way to bring the Women's Council under the control of the NWO). The leadership of the organization was reserved for the males only. The Women's Council suffered great doom when its leadership was arrested in 1977 by an anonymous letter to the police indicating their supreme power even over men, making a case against them as a force to reckon with.

At the time, there was also the *Ifwe's* council which was exclusively male. These had replaced the *Ekwe* who initially held political powers to rule, in fact the *Ekwe* title for women was banned. Another organization evolved, the Nnobi Home Welfare Organization (NHWO), this organiza-

tion did not invite the women, so, as at 1982, there was no woman included. Even after independence, the story was no different. “Women, even though they were also liable to pay the levies, became an unwaged labor force for bush-clearing, carrying sand and wood, and fetching water, and in general became the public cleansing department and an entertainment group to dance for local chiefs and politicians” (Amadiume, 2015:148). The major influence of Christianity on women’s authority is summed up in this way:

Clearly, in the minds of Christians and Western-influenced elites, such ‘maleness’ and ‘headstrongness’ were unfeminine. In their opinion, all women ought to bow their heads to their husbands. The biblical story of creation was cited and woman was seen as a helpmate. One should respect and hold sacred what is written by God: for God said that a woman shall be under her husband and obey her husband (see Genesis 2:21; 3:16) (Amadiume, 2015:155).

The Bible and distorted cultural references became the conditions for gender relations and women were subjugated in the process. It was the modern institutions that empowered men over women as in the precolonial era, women assumed political authority comfortably.

In the precolonial indigenous Nnobi society, women assumed positions of power and wealth through organized cultural structures as wives, mothers, market women, council and Ekwe titles. They could also assume the positions of sons and husbands as explained early on. The post-colonial era was not favorable to them. Nonetheless, the women clung firmly to their positions as wives and mothers and observed these roles unreservedly. Despite the marginalization, their industriousness was still visible as they continued to farm foodstuff, which their families depended on, and paid much of the school fees. Consequently, women’s hard work was no longer recognized as in the case of men (who took the *ozo* titles) since they were stripped of their titles.

While men were now into big businesses and served as contractors, their wives remained in the farms, only few women would own a provision store or were in business with their husbands in the urban centers. Hence, the women themselves admitted that they were no longer wealthy (Amadiume, 2015:163). Motherhood became the main identity for

women and it was reflected even in their Christian associations. In the Catholic church was the Christian Mothers and in the Anglican Church was the Mothers' Union, there was then another national organization of successful business women which had a branch in Nnobi known as Sweet Mother. Women later settled with the duty as peacemakers enduring subjugation and servitude as the norm as they were silenced by male-biased, colonial and Christian patriarchal ideologies. The Christian women would now accept to carry the cross of Christ as against seeking for positions of power. The mother's organizations in the church had replaced the women's councils as they followed similar criteria for selecting leaders and membership. Moreover, leadership was exclusive to the wives of the clergy and leaders. The women now were involved in fundraisings and charity. Women experienced exploitation and marginalization, the Christian values of modesty and self-denial would not motivate them to pursue social, economic or political power.

### **Postcolonial Patriarchal Notions versus Indigenous African Womanhood**

The fourth phase of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm asks: how are women appreciated in the context? I seek to reflect on womanhood in the postcolonial era in Nnobi society vis-à-vis the perceptions of womanhood in Africa. Amadiume indicated that a comparative study with other African societies would be a good avenue for further research. A comprehensive comparison is impossible due to lack of space and the multiplicities of African cultures. Notwithstanding, some general African women and specific contextual notions are highlighted.

I have stated elsewhere that

“patriarchy in the African cultures is just a way of life and the norm. In fact, this is the order of the day, anything contrary is either applauded with some ‘Wow’ or detested with utmost fierceness ... Traditional, cultural norms and values demand that the man is always in charge. Female roles have been audaciously restricted to wifeness, motherhood, servanthood, and slavery in severe instances” (Amenyedzi, 2021a:173; cf. Amenyedzi, 2021b).



The revelation in Ife's research is that, after all, not all African cultures were originally patriarchal as it is now, but there was a huge influence from colonialization and Christianity. Masenya (1997) has indicated that African cultures were patriarchal before the advent of colonialization. Nonetheless, whether influenced by colonialism or Christianity, most African cultures are patriarchal, meaning that womanhood has not been valued beyond servitude, marriage and motherhood. A woman who is not married is an abomination, a childless woman must have been cursed or bewitched. Children remain the guarantee for inheritance in her matrimonial home, otherwise she must forget sharing in the inheritance of her husband. Widowhood rites remain "hell fire" as Amadiume rightfully puts it.

The socio-cultural constructions of womanhood in Africa compelled our mother Mama Mercy Oduyoye to lead this crusade for creating spaces for women to express themselves, and in our case, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and those in the ministry (cf. Oduyoye, 2001).

There have been many such women solidarity groups and organizations championing the inclusion and mainstreaming of African women, and relentlessly fighting against inhumane cultural practices such as female circumcision, widowhood and slavery among many others.

Just like Nnobi town, the market place continues to be the domain of women in various contexts and women continue to assume the roles of sustenance for their families. Women in most African communities continue to grapple with patriarchal notions in the church. Very few women have been able to access leadership roles in the church and society at large, but this is not without dealing with patriarchal ideologies. Interpretations to the *imago Dei* and biblical texts especially those on silence and submission of women in the Pauline letters are a constant point of reference to subjugate women in the church (see Amenyedzi, 2019; Apea, 2019).

In her conclusion, Amadiume mentions the role of queen mothers in other parts of Africa and their significant roles. The queen mother among the Akan of Ghana for instance, has the right to enstool and *destool* kings and chiefs; she reigns at the death of a king until a new one is enstooled

(Nkansah, 2008). There are still priestesses at many shrines, which are equally consulted by men. How is it that men submit to these priestesses in the spiritual settings but otherwise in other settings (Amenyedzi, 2021a)? Talking of appreciation of women in Africa, I argue that we are mostly appreciated as wives, mothers, and servants rather than as equal partners and role players in the society as a whole.

It would be interesting to further research the current gender and sexuality fluidity as compared to the then gender flexibility in Nnobi.

### **Postcolonial Reconstruction of Womanhood in Nnobi**

The next question to address in the paradigm is: how does the situation in question affect the African woman? The impact of colonialization and Christianity on gender roles has been reiterated in many places above. Womanhood was indeed reconstructed among the Igbo people of Nnobi in the postcolonial period. In the precolonial era, there were specific gender roles assigned to households and farming, however, there were non-biological sexual roles as in female husbands and male daughters. Women were believed to have inherited prosperity from their goddess, hence, wealth was synonymous to womanhood. They did not own land but they were assigned portions by their husbands on which the sustenance of their households depended on.

The households were matrifocal/matricentric, although the husband remained the head (he had his own space at the fore of the compound-*obi*); the mothers were in charge of their household units which were self-sustaining. The women's role in sustaining the family cannot be underestimated as they depended on her crops during famine and scarcity. Nnobi women undoubtedly were industrious, provided for their families which is a symbol of wealth and power. Contrariwise, the tables turned against them during the colonial period leading to the postcolonial era. Men easily accessed education and employment, the palm oil industry which was mainly owned by women moved to the factories and mills constructed by the colonial masters ripping off the women a major source of income. This became the new era of poverty for Nnobi women and wealth for the men.

The *ogubuefi* title was for both males and females who could kill a cow for the goddess *Idemili*. The male daughters and female husbands. There were flexible gender economic and political roles. It is relevant to mention that the goddess was female and the priest a male who dressed like a female (female man as he was referred to), who consulted with *Agba Ekwe* a woman who was next to the goddess hierarchically. This is another portrayal of gender flexibility. Religiously, women's position was revered. Since the goddess owned the market, it was the domain of the women. Patrilineal daughters had important roles, especially at funerals. Children also paid allegiance to their matrilineage and were required to perform different duties or rituals.

The Women's Council was indeed a force to reckon with; it ensured family planning and served as a form of security and protection for the women. Here again, it is clear that women in the precolonial period assumed political, economic and social roles. They had their own mechanism for protecting women against different forms of abuse. Unfortunately, postcolonial and Christian patriarchal ideologies eroded such powers from placing them under the subjugation of men. The reconstructed Nnobi woman in the church and society no longer had a voice of her own but had to submit; as she was told that submission was a form of portraying genuine godliness. Liberation theology teaches that biblically, submission is for both men and women, we all submit to God and to each other; the woman's submission is to her husband.

Wifhood and motherhood were accepted by the women as their roles were reflected in their celebrations and rituals that accompanied marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. However, this did not rip them off other spiritual, political, economic and social roles. Widowhood did not favor the then women of Nnobi as compared to men, even in the early days. Consequently, postcolonial notions seem to ascribe wifhood and motherhood as the only main roles women must play whilst the response to women's achievement is perceived as extraordinary or abnormal but not normal as it should be. (cf. Amenyedzi, 2021a). Widowhood seems to remain an ordeal for Nnobi women and women in Africa.

Amadiume highlights the tensions between feminism and womanism in that, the experiences of African women were not contextually considered and framed. Meaning the Eurocentric and imperialist ideologies

and framework for the feminist discourse were out of place and did not favor African women. Hence, the call for womanists to frame our discourse around our African socio-cultural experiences and framework is in order.

## **A New Era for African Womanhood: Re-claiming Our Empowered Identity**

The final phase of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm seeks to identify the redemptive elements of culture, and how that could influence the appreciation of the African woman. Our revered Mama Mercy Oduyoye and the renowned Matriarchs saw the need over thirty-five years ago to gather women theologians in Africa for solidarity and inclusion in mainstream ministry and academia (cf. Oduyoye, 2001). Not only in the theological sphere but the advocacy, debates and campaigns for the liberation of African women continues in many other contexts. There have been some victories in this endeavor but the truth remains that, women still experience subjugation due to patriarchal notions in the church, culture and various aspects of societal life.

Even though it is true that African cultures were enshrined in patriarchy even before the colonizers (Masenya, 1997), a focus on Ife Amadiume's book compels us to go back to take that which was lost, if not in all Africa, at least in Nnobi. The title of this book and others in this publication series is *Sankofa*. *Sankofa* is a Ghanaian (Akan) term, which means, "go back and take that which is forgotten" (Chic African Culture). This is a call to reclaim our identity, our empowered identity in all facets of life. Prof Musa Dube observed that in the fight against colonization, the focus was only on general imperialism but the suppression of women was not included in the fight, hence, the continual subjugation of the African woman (Dube, 2018).

To reclaim our empowered identity as African women, these frameworks as proposed by renowned African women will be useful tools. Since colonialism was synonymous to Christianity, I start from Christian models. Dube (2000) proposes a postcolonial feminist framework, she engages on that journey through reading literary works (particularly nov-

els) that portray colonialism and patriarchy. She also engages in a post-colonial reading of the Bible. Her groundbreaking book, *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* is a go to for us Christians especially theologians. Masenya's (1997) Bosadi approach and womanist theological frameworks (cf. Gafney, 2017; Floyd-Thomas, 2010). I have also proposed a womanist theology of disability elsewhere in dealing with the ordeal of women with disability in Africa as I argue that they suffer 3D – three dimensions of Disability, Discrimination and Disadvantage (Amenyedzi, 2021b). Chisale (2018a, 2018b) also writes extensively on the emancipation African women in general and women with disability. In this *Sankofa* book series where this chapter is presented, there are liberation theologies of many African matriarchs who have called for the emancipation of African womanhood.

Aside theology, there are several voices in various fields against the subjugation of women in Africa due to religious and cultural patriarchal notions which extends to all aspects of life. If we do not stigmatize gender roles and break loose from rigid gender ideologies, masculinized and feminized roles. Oh! – Then this world would definitely be a better place for all of us.

## CONCLUSION

The chapter sought to reflect on Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. The findings from her ethnographical study prove that, in the early days, gender and sexuality were constructed in flexible terms so that females could assume male roles as male daughters and female husbands who were entitled to rights and privileges just as the men. Women possessed economic, political and socio-cultural powers that gave them the needed freedom from subjugation as compared to the colonial and postcolonial periods. Even though there were specified gender roles in terms of farming and households; women who were typically wives and mothers, could also assume significant economic, spiritual and political positions of power. The advent of colonialism and Christianity was the beginning of the doom of the Igbo women in Nnobi. Even though in some African societies, patriarchy and subjugation of women were there before colonization and Christianity,

the impact on women cannot be underrated even in such communities. Womanhood was now reconstructed along Christian and Western Ideologies to mean silence, humility and obedience to men which was a sign of true godliness. The struggle for emancipation of African women continues, as we engage various feminist and womanist frameworks as mentioned above, we hope that we shall overcome someday and *Sankofa* will become a reality for the Igbo women of Nnobi in Nigeria and Africa as a continent.

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## 2 | THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION IN CHIMAMANDA'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

*Gesila Nneka Uzukwu*

### **Abstract**

Critical discourses in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* have generally engaged this important postcolonial work from the perspectives of colonial history, gender dynamism, deconstruction of its narratives, and the literary/linguistic agenda of its characters, plots, and dialogues. Departing from these dominant approaches, the present study appropriates the discourses, worldviews, and values of *Purple Hibiscus* through the prism of liberation theology. It examines the theological motifs in *Purple Hibiscus* in critical conversation to patriarchy, colonialism, and sexism. Grounded in liberation methodology of African women theologians, the study offers new perspectives in Adichie's representation of radical female characters, and their traumatic quest for liberation in patriarchal and post-patriarchal spaces. Through these feminine encounters, *Purple Hibiscus* provides a theological guide for the task and practice of African liberation theology.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Adichie, Patriarchy, liberation theologies, Christianity, Religion, *Purple Hibiscus*, postcolonialism, violence, patriarchal resistance, Gender.

### **Introduction**

*Purple Hibiscus* has generated a lot of controversies and debates on the diverse forms of exploitations of women by the intimidating forces of institutionalized patriarchy and the cultural machineries of religious belief systems, which collectively impoverished the human flourishing of the



female gender in Africa.<sup>1</sup> Since its publication in 2003, *Purple Hibiscus* has elicited diverse interpretative engagements and multifaceted conversations within the intellectual area of postcolonial discourses. We discern four major scholarly trajectories.

The first method approaches the literature from the perspective of its philosophical-postcolonial template. Scholars who use this method examine the philosophical ideologies postulated in the characterization, background, and the general metanarrative world which impacted the creation of Adichie's novel. Taylor, for instance, takes up the philosophical and ideological mappings of *Purple Hibiscus* as they 'arise and evolve in contradistinction to other opposing ideologies' (1991:48). For Udu-mukwu and others (2011:192; Ogwude, 2011; Raja, 2019) the narrative universe of *Purple Hibiscus* exposes the symbolic and actual reality of the post African colonial society.

The second approach explores the methodology of deconstruction. Based on the modern impact of Jacques Derrida, the application of this method on *Purple Hibiscus* seeks to unpack the cultural binaries and tensions in the world of *Purple Hibiscus* in direct conversation to Adichie or other social constructs. Fwangyil (2011:264, 273) feminist's reading of *Purple Hibiscus* attempts to deconstruct the author's perceptions about patriarchy and how the author's description of patriarchy in *Purple Hibiscus* mirrors the radical feminist's position which is closely associated with the extreme expression of western feminism. Oha (2007) approached the deconstruction of *Purple Hibiscus* from the perspective of

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<sup>1</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award respectively. The author is one of the contemporary African female writers to have won an international recognition for her prowess in translating her world of experiences into fascinating and thought-provoking works that challenge our conceptions about the impacts of colonialism and cultural imperialism on the state of women in Africa. Additionally, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has made its landmark as one of the best African novels that has been translated into over thirty languages. The novel has four narrative sections that are further subdivided in sixteen chapters. The four sections are entitled, (1) "Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday" (1-24); (2) "Speaking with our spirits: Before Palm Sunday (25-258); (3) "The pieces of God: After Palm Sunday " (259-295); and (4) "A different silence: The present (297-330).

its political agenda, while Ogaga (2009; Beilke, 2006) deconstructed the use of silence as a patriarchal weapon to subdue women and awakened the consciousness about the historical absence of women in many sectors of African society.

The third approach engages *Purple Hibiscus* in its linguistic and literary methodologies. Here, scholars are interested in *Purple Hibiscus* as a beautiful fictional work of art that uses language, narrative methods, literary and linguistic devices to intensely capture, create, or critique the themes and ideas raised in the novel. Using Fowler's theory of "mind-style", Tunca (2009) explains the way Kambili's use of language and style charted the trajectories of oppression and freedom woven into the novel. Al Fajri (2017) studies the specific uses of narrative styles and linguistic devices in *Purple Hibiscus* as they help shape characters' personalities and reader's perception of them. And few others (Hewett, 2005; Bryce, 2008) identify *Purple Hibiscus* as part of the rising wave of African female writers who are on the mission of rewriting the Nigerian literary history.

The fourth method deploys a liberative approach. A significant number of studies on *Purple Hibiscus* observes the many ways religio-cultural ideas of patriarchy and other dominant ideologies greatly shaped and perpetuated the objectification, oppression, and marginalization of women. They then underline ways that *Purple Hibiscus* resists these oppressive metanarratives with liberating paradigms that can help women upturn the oppressive systems and redefine their identities. Ifechelobi (2014), for instance, observes with interest Adichie's radical option of killing the patriarch as a way of emancipating women from the victimhood of androcentric values and other cultural oppressive worldviews. Stobie (2010; Ordu, 2021) focusses on Adichie's endorsement of "values such as respect, tolerance, forgiveness and hybridity in terms of religion, spirituality, culture and gender roles" as solution to the use of religion to govern and dominate people.

Despite these significant assessments, it is worth noting that there have not been studies on *Purple Hibiscus* from the centrality of liberation theology. Departing from the earlier methodological agenda, this present work engages the narrative world of *Purple Hibiscus* through the formidable lenses of its theological motifs, and the liberative theology that ap-

appropriates the characterization, plot and narrative world of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* from the perspective of Christian theology. Grounded on liberative theological methods by African women theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, B. Mbuy-Beya, Theresa Okure and Musa Dube, this work evaluates Adichie's liberating visions and counter-theology in its confrontation with dominant theological traditions and their attending religious assumptions which subtly empowered patriarchy and other cultural oppressions of women in postcolonial African society.

## 1. Patriarchy, Liberation Theology & *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's representation of patriarchy in *Purple Hibiscus* draws largely from the gender stereotypes that has its historical roots in both the practices of African Christianity and African cultures.<sup>2</sup> In the narrative world of *Purple Hibiscus*, there are two important systemic institutions that reinforce patriarchy, (a) the church, and (b) the society. The character of Eugene Achike (the husband of Beatrice, and the father of Jaja and Kambili) is projected as an embodiment of these structures since his religious beliefs and traditional upbringing were his continual points of referents for his oppressive behavior and intimidating sense of identity in and outside of his household.

Motivated by his religious ideologies, Eugene's household served like a mini-sacred space and a mini-Christian community to ensure the spread, continuity, and realization of the Christian message. In contrast, what one encounters were thrilling visual horrors of violence, oppression and intimidation perpetuated by the patriarchal figure Eugene (Adichie, 2003:5, 11-25, 30, 33-36, 105, 158-162, 249-250). Eugene was very brutal, and majority of the violence inflicted on his family stem from his religious convictions which were not a reflection of true Christianity. Difficult as it might seemed to picture the gruesome scenes of violence in *Purple Hibiscus*, it becomes even more heartbreaking to see that Eugene

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<sup>2</sup> According to Oduyoye (1986), patriarchy is not foreign to Africans. Most, if not all, African societies are patriarchal. The problem, however, is that the conventional patriarchy of postcolonial times was marred by oppressive power relationship, social structures and ideologies that changed the gender relational dynamisms and generated much conflict than originally was.

never considered his violent attitude a problem. He did not want his authentic Christian beliefs to challenge his predisposition to gender violence, intimidation, and harassment.

Eugene was an embodiment of patriarchy *par excellence*. Eugene had complete control over his wife and children's emotions, thoughts, and actions. He decides the organization of the household and forces them to participate. Paradoxically, his Christian beliefs pervasively emboldened and reinforced his oppressive attitudes. Eugene's socio-cultural and religious beliefs operated seamlessly in the world of *Purple Hibiscus* to the extent Eugene was by way of his Christian religious conviction, the perfect example of the Christian believer who enjoyed the goodwill, cordial relationship, and sacerdotal approval of the church. Given the above background, Adichie uses the images of the two female characters, Auntie Ifeoma and Beatrice to deconstruct patriarchy.

The resistance paradigm projected in Auntie Ifeoma's depicts the African womanist's approach that protests patriarchy and its roots in religion and culture by uplifting and empowering the woman to make changes from within. The nature of Mercy Oduyoye's solution to patriarchy can be likened to Adichie's proposition in *Purple Hibiscus*. As Oduyoye (1988:50) emphasizes, education creates the grassroot resource and power every female needs to resist patriarchal influence. Auntie Ifeoma's educational exposure was the first element that will shape her future because it offered her the opportunity for self-development, gender flourishing and identity building. Because of her background, Auntie Ifeoma's house became a liberative space where patriarchy is apparently neutralized, and its androcentric demonic control on the female gender is duly exorcised.

Like Oduyoye, Adichie critiqued patriarchy by encouraging the paradigm of women empowerment of other women. Auntie Ifeoma exemplifying this model, identifies with the victim of patriarchy in building structures of solidarity and resistance where she can bond with Beatrice and the other women to empower them in bold and assertive resistance of the gender *status quo* in the world of *Purple Hibiscus*. According to Oduyoye (1990:48), "the power of African women is in the solidarity" against patriarchy which is "achieved through the formation of sisterhoods". For Auntie Ifeoma, a caution on religion is a caution on patriarchy. The ability

to accept the differences inherent in every religion and culture, and the openness to accept its rich values and virtues will greatly facilitate the transformation of the stereotypical representations of the female gender in *Purple Hibiscus*.

In the character of Beatrice, Adichie resisted patriarchy by eliminating Eugene, thereby unleashing chaos on her world. This type of cruelty executed to Eugene is untypical of the African woman. It means that Beatrice's dynamics of resistance can be located within Adichie's diasporic exposure. In the setting of Global North, the path of cultural de-masculinization of the male gender or a social campaign for its cultural execution is often pursued in the quest to address the problem of patriarchy. This cultural program is largely witnessed in the "suicidal politics," one that is driven by the impulses of 'no future', 'no survival' for the patriarch (see also Sullivan, 2016:274-278).

Both the liberative choices of Auntie Ifeoma and Beatrice were feasible and liberating for the moment but were not sustainable and forceful to the end. Auntie Ifeoma seems to have launched social religious ideas to deconstruct the hegemony of patriarchy, but she could not stay to enforce the erasure of the abuse of power and the wrong conceptions and treatment of gender. She absconded the dominant patriarchy of African society to the relatively liberal worlds of the West by traveling abroad. On the part of Beatrice, the death of patriarchy symbolized by her killing of Eugene paralyzed the entire household and drove the system dependent upon it into chaos. Thus, patriarchy was a problem, but the destruction of patriarchy was not the solution. Patriarchy could not stay, neither can the matriarch hold the system.

Weighing the strengths and weakness of each of the liberating paradigms, one can say that Beatrice's failure is measured by Auntie Ifeoma's trained capacity to confront patriarchy. The merged personalities or characters of these two women in *Purple Hibiscus* appeared to enforce and romanticize Adichie's utopia which is seen in the brutal killing of the patriarchy symbolized by Eugene on one hand, and the escape from the chaos of the post-patriarchal world through liberative movement of Ifeoma abroad.

## 2. Colonialism, Liberation Theology & *Purple Hibiscus*

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene embraced colonialism *en toto*. He was a micro reflection of what colonial ideologies were detested for – male dominance, hierarchical power relationships, exploitation, imposition of western culture and belief, demonization of African culture and tradition, the notion of superiority, discrimination, including the use of violence to pursue and sustain authority and domination. Eugene domesticated his family upon the standards deployed by the colonizers who themselves came to domesticate Africa and to exercise their patriarchal hold and institutions on African society. Eugene lacked the critical mind capable of appreciating the rich traditional heritage of his people. On the contrary, he was brainwashed to belief that speaking in the tongue of his master, dressing in his clothes, eating his food, drinking his wine, and adopting his master's religion would translate into self-worth and dignity for himself (Adichie, 2003:86-87; Wa Thiong O', 1986:3).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie critiques the impact of colonialism on Africa. She admits the harrowing effect of colonialism on Africans, especially the marginalization of African culture and the inferiority complex mentality that causes Africans to denigrate their cultural identity and religion. She initiates a discussion about decolonization of the mind. It comes in the form of decentralization of our perceptions about oppressive colonial realities and the recentralization of the African religious systems and values. This was very evident in certain narrative conversations that took place in Auntie Ifeoma's household, such as, picking a confirmation name, singing Igbo songs at mass/family prayers, and encouraging the children to appreciate the richness of Nigerian culture and heritage (Adichie, 2003:139, 273). In addition, she insists on the beauty and worth of a vast amount of Igbo festivals, practices, and beliefs.

Auntie Ifeoma's household served as mini-revolutionary space where the characters sit together to interrogate the problems associated with colonial enterprise, and seek ways to protest against it. Using the principles of dialogue, interrogation, and negotiation, Auntie Ifeoma was able to deconstruct Eugene's discriminatory and oppressive mentality in relation to religion and culture. She used the space of her home to unwrite contested claims about colonial ideals, especially in the areas of power and

patriarchy, oppressive construction of family values and relationships, and domestic responsibilities. Although Auntie Ifeoma's home lacks the luxuries and wealth of Eugene's home, it possesses the wealth of freedom, peace and openness that help build a social cultural identity founded on dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect.

Adichie's challenge of colonialism is certainly interesting, however, her liberating solutions were not forceful enough to impact lasting changes. For economic reasons and disappointments over unfulfilled hope for a working Nigeria, Auntie Ifeoma migrated to America, thereby recolonizing herself in the land of her former colonizers. By abandoning the victimized system and running into the system of the oppressor, Adichie is indirectly reaffirming what it criticizes. Such a move could be criticized since it reaffirms the indispensability of colonial system for survival. In context, the voice of Auntie Ifeoma gradually became a faded voice in the fight against colonial impacts. Her letters to Kambili and Jaja no longer speaks about the patterns of colonial exploitation, but of her progress in her new location.

As with other post-colonial literature, *Purple Hibiscus* tries to wage the war against colonialism, but still caught up in an attitude of attachment to colonial exigencies and system they criticize. Adichie, writes her literature from the Western world and even uses Western feminist thoughts to criticize the postcolonial society. This position bespeaks of the complex nature of every attempt to resist postcolonial control. Perhaps, Adichie's principles of dialogue, interrogation, and negotiation may work to destabilize certain colonial narratives that have destroyed traditional institutions, values, and systems, but must be forceful to the end.

### **3. Sexism, Liberation Theology & *Purple Hibiscus***

There are three sexist discussions projected in *Purple Hibiscus*. The first is the sexist discussion of a woman as a mother. Motherhood in African is defined in terms of giving birth, protecting, and nurturing the life of the child (children). As Chodorow (1978:22) points out, biologically women are assumed to be mothers because they have "a natural mothering instinct, or maternal instinct, and that therefore it is 'natural' that

they mother, or even that they therefore ought to mother". Eugene expected Beatrice to be a perfect mother, but the patriarchal ordering of her home turned Beatrice from a mother to a murderer.

In Beatrice, we discern femaleness in terms of failed motherhood and murderhood. Beatrice experienced the brokenness of motherhood because of the treatments she received from Eugene. Beatrice could not protect the lives of her born and unborn children (Adichie, 2003:103, 194-196). She lost nine pregnancies (Adichie, 2003:36, 249).<sup>3</sup> Under intense and perverse situations, she could not keep up the patriarchal nicety and impositions. Where she could not protect or prevent her miscarriages, she also decides to miscarry the marriage. By murdering Eugene, Beatrice shows how some women under severe pressure in their marriages can resort to terminating the lives of their children or husband. Here, the line between a mother and a murderer is so thin, and Beatrice crossed it.<sup>4</sup>

The other sexist presentation of the African woman is that of a housewife. The sense of being a housewife implied that Beatrice had no work outside of the home. Beatrice did not have any higher formal education, at least, when compared to Auntie Ifeoma. She was not an office holder or a group leader in any organization in her social or religious settings. Within her home, her major function was cooking (including instructing Sisi the house-help on how to improve the taste of the food), plaiting Kambili's hair, savoring the drinks from Eugene's factory, and polishing

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<sup>3</sup> Nine times, Beatrice missed the feeling of having a child because Eugene will constantly beat her to induce miscarriages. Kambili recounts the many times she saw her mother's blood dripping the staircase, "the blood was watery, flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes". Even in the absence of the children, the blood kept flowing from Mama. When Beatrice arrived Nsukka, she narrates to Kambili, "You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly [...] My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes".

<sup>4</sup> One of the societal expectations for a woman is to be a perfect mother, as part of its patriarchal influence, the society does not put into perspective the abuse and molestations that trigger most women into taking laws into their own hands and committing murder (or other related actions of resistance). Mothers are encouraged to remain in their marriages even at the expense of their own life. Beatrice was trapped in miscarriages of life and death – of the death of her unborn children, husband, and marriage.



the glass (Adichie, 2003:8, 11, 13). To be precise, the role of Beatrice was an embodiment of the state of the African woman – one who is locked up in a housewife role, with clearly mapped out duties assigned to her. She is submissive to the husband, obedient, lacked initiatives, and the oppressive system ensured that she is continually depended on the husband (Adichie, 2003:251).

The third sexist representation of the African woman is that of a wife. From *Purple Hibiscus* we note that marriage in African culture is seen as an achievement. “A woman with children and no husband, what is that?”, Beatrice retorts (Adichie, 2003:236). It is the belief of a typical African man that marrying a woman gives the woman an identity and a social face, and women have been brainwashed to belief such idea. With this belief, when a woman faces marital crises, she is encouraged to stay in the marriage to avoid societal shame, attacks, or displeasure.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie resists the oppressive paradigms about femininity. In the voice of Auntie Ifeoma, Adichie attempts to re-situate and recentralize the position of women in the African society. The strategy lies in deconstructing the stereotypes about femaleness in relations to motherhood, housewife and wife. Adichie’s projection of motherhood in Auntie Ifeoma can be compared to the pattern of motherhood suggested by Oduyoye – a shift from biological motherhood to an encompassing social motherhood. For Oduyoye, motherhood goes beyond biological productivity to social productivity, for the “woman is the glue that holds society together” (Oduyoye, 1986:72). Auntie Ifeoma’s state of widowhood could be regarded as a breaking away from the ‘motherhood-childbearing’ paradigm since she refused to remarry, and yet she was a phenomenal mother.

But Adichie’s representation of motherhood in Beatrice is questionable, as already presented. In the ‘kill the patriarch’ paradigm, one wonders whether Adichie’s emancipation from the traditional notion of motherhood resonates with African women writer’s matrix of motherhood. Mbuy-Beya would insist that African women’s struggle for freedom must be separated from the struggles of their Western feminist counterparts because the African traditional society still values the richness and virtues of motherhood and needs to be incorporated in the discussion. In her view, “[African woman] is the mother of the children, the

mother of everyone. By her motherhood, she establishes her status in society and ensures the demographic growth of the group. And she is mightily proud of it" (Mbuy-Beya, 1989:264).

Given that Adichie is writing under the influence of modernity and western feminism, it is not clear whether she is embracing the African women writer's position or promoting the 'world without men paradigm.' One thing is certain, that by upholding Auntie Ifeoma's state of widowhood Adichie is rejecting the patriarchal cultural conceptions and prejudiced notions woven around the neck of the African mother which often suffocates rather than frees her (Adichie, 2003:76). Contrary to Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma is the "bold, hardworking, strong, assertive, and economically independent" woman (Astrick, 2018:49). She was economically stable, even in the absence of her husband. She was educated like Eugene, as such was empowered from the beginning for a future sustained life. Auntie Ifeoma's educational background prescribes the right of every girl or woman.

Adichie also challenged the notion of the African woman as a wife. The view that marriage is a license to happiness or certificate of identity for an African woman comes under attack in *Purple Hibiscus*. The state of Auntie Ifeoma's widowhood and her ability to protect and care for her family gives a different notion of women as wives. Auntie Ifeoma refuses to remarry, because for her the loss of the husband is not a loss of identity and responsibilities. The experience of Beatrice was an embodiment of marriage without love, marriage full of sacrifices and pain. Beatrice's experiences can be used to further debate on the state of women in several marriages, with special reference to love, sacrifice and pain.

Adichie advocates for women to seek for freedom from abusive marriages. Staying in abusive marriages can attract violent repercussions, oppressive consequences, and loss of life. For Adichie, Auntie Ifeoma's role idealizes a somewhat balanced approach to femininity and sexism in African context. In the absence of the husband, Auntie Ifeoma was able to support and train her family. The question is, how resilient can the woman be in the absence of the husband? Does Auntie Ifeoma's liberating strategy annihilates the male gender? If the answer is yes, what will be alternative strategy where both the man and woman can be very relevant, while oppressive cultures are overcome?

#### 4. Ecclesiology of Pain, Liberation Theology & *Purple Hibiscus*

One of the fundamental assumptions in *Purple Hibiscus* is that the practicing of religion brings pain and sufferings. At the institutional level, the Church displays a certain level of religious rigidity and formalism that is seen as part of the formative strategy that seek to protect the teachings of the Church. However, these religious rigidity and legalism in essence shows Christianity (and other similar religions) as a structure that lacks compassion and charity towards other human beings.

From the actions of Eugene, it is believed that Christianity is best practiced when it is rigidly interpreted, and its instructions mindlessly followed. There were levels of intolerance, even for the slightest mistake. For instance, there were set of rules that were meant to be obeyed during the rite of Holy Communion, and the Church demanded full obedience of these traditionally laid down religious rites. One of these religious instructions was not eating 10 minutes before mass. According to Eugene, the breach of this requirement is considered sinful and attracts divine punishment (Adichie, 2003:7-8, 102-103). There was certain level of cultural intolerance witnessed in the various church's activities, prayers, songs, and spirituality. For instance, Fr Benedict resented the use of Igbo songs at mass.

In the Church, Eugene is praised as one who speaks out for freedom, charity, and love. He was generous to the Church and would even pay for the cartons of communion wine. But Eugene mocks his charity works by failing to exemplify these virtues at home, placing a hypocritical wedge between the spirituality at the church and the one at home. Eugene's religious rigidity were detrimental to the life and existence of his family members as community of believers. His implacable stance on religion vis a vis culture and morals led to his uncontrollable anger, anxiety, obsession with sin, and other behavioral anomalies. Eugene talks about sin, but the abuse in his home, the anger in his heart, the injury he inflicts on his children, the murdering of his unborn children, are nothing less than sin.

At the level of the family unit, religion is pain and a kind of mockery for the rich and the strong. Religion also subtle scorns the faith of the

poor and the weak. In Eugene's household, religion is butchered, ridiculed, and mocked. In the merciless beatings and the number of stigmas left on the children and wife, Eugene's representation of religion was murderous, insensitive to suffering, dehumanizing, abusive, and oppressive. The Christian statues, and other relics found in Eugene's home were supposed to be a constant reminder of their spirituality and dedication to the life of faith, hope and love, but in *Purple Hibiscus* their presence made no difference to the patriarchal and abusive character of Eugene.

For Beatrice and her children, religion could not defend or rescue them from the oppressive hands of Eugene. Rather it left them in a state of helpless and defenseless. It is ironical that Beatrice was experiencing the most horrendous and appalling manifestations of what could be described as the failure of religion, yet she wore on her neck, the image that reads "GOD is love" (Adichie, 2003:35).<sup>5</sup> The idea of remaining in and endorsing a religion that is traumatizing and oppressive explains the situation of most African women. There are many internal and external problems that have catalyzed the experiences of women because of their religious convictions. Instead of speaking up and negotiating their freedom, they will rather remain passive because they have been brain-washed into believing that living with their broken dreams and realities are symbols of one's true commitment to religion (Manning, 1997:382).

The pains of religion can also be perceived in the religious spats between Eugene and his father (Papa Nnukwu). Eugene's religious claims and intolerant attitude toward his father promoted religious antagonism, hatred, rejection, and resentment. Papa Nnukwu suffered so much in the hands of his son, for despite his son's wealth, he lived the life of a pauper (Adichie, 2003:84). Papa Nnukwu resentments and pains highlight the indubitable, violent, and perhaps, the many untold stories of individuals suffering because of their religious identity.

For Adichie, Eugene's religiosity negates the essence of true religion. In the character of Auntie Ifeoma, Adichie resiliently asserted religion as

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<sup>5</sup> What Beatrice was wearing the day she returned from the hospital ought to bear some resemblance or relationship with what Eugene's religion professes, namely, compassion, mercy, and love. But such was not the case.

kindness, love, and compassion. Adichie argues for certain level of flexibility with religious rules as they sometimes inflict pains on the lives of those who seek to live by them. In addition, some of these rules have played a role in the promotion of religious and gender violence.<sup>6</sup> Adichie does not suggest the overcoming of religion but challenges the use of religion to promote patriarchal perspectives and ideologies, especially the ones that promote oppression. As Mbuy-Beya (2001:197) would defend, our religious reflections must be based on wisdom and feeling, such that is to be found not only in the head, but also in the heart and the gut.

Adichie also promotes openness to understanding the ways of other people's tradition and culture. Certain rituals or rites which Eugene condemned were accepted by Auntie Ifeoma not as an alternative to Christian faith, but traditions that are rich in value and has its way of supporting the cultural values of the people and their society. Both Auntie Ifeoma's household and Fr Amadi use Igbo words and traditional songs as worship songs and would clap their hands during worship. This is a deliberate effort by the writer to affirm the validity and importance of African traditional religious and cultural systems against the Western assumptions of their faith superiority (see also Strayer, 1976:1-15). In addition, such a move shows that African Christianity must be shaped by the content of her cultures, which plays a significant role in identifying her roots and for the adoption of the new religious beliefs. According to Éla (2009:15), such a Christianity will have within its veins all that is authentically African without exception.

The love relationship between Fr Amadi and Kambili was an experience that helped Kambili come to terms with her femininity and sexuality. But it also projects the quibbling attitude of Fr Amadi with his priestly celibacy. On the theological front, Fr Amadi's actions can be seen as a breach of his vocation of 'no marriage' for the sake of the Kingdom of God. But from a human point of view, his love relationship with Kambili

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<sup>6</sup> Here reference could also be made of institutional or religious laws that deny women of the right and freedom to participate actively in their institutional or religious settings, and of moral laws that represses the freedom of people to deal genuinely or meaningful with their moral choices, or in relation to their lives and relationships.

is natural and expressive of his human sexuality. It is paradoxical, however, because priestly celibacy goes against laws of human nature. The problem is that the failure to balance this religious teaching with human experiences results in numerous cases of women and girls being entangled in love relationships with clergy men, with cases of pregnancies and abortions at worst (see also Mbuy-Beya, 2001:196). Adichie uses Fr Amadi's case to re-awaken the debate on sexuality and the church for the future.

## 5. The Theological Legacy of *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's discussions on patriarchy, colonialism, religion, and gender chart new trajectories for theological legacies of *Purple Hibiscus*. The book critically wrestled with the repressive history of patriarchy and Christian religion in Africa and projected subversive agenda that can enrich contemporary gender and religious discourses. Most of her contributions are contextually relevant to the hermeneutical task of addressing issues, such as the religious and cultural problems associated with patriarchy, colonial effects on the history of Africa, how religion and culture doubly oppress and exploit women, economic and social justice for women and children, dialogue between the faiths, and the dangers of religious rigidity or close-mindedness.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a liberation theology. Adichie's liberation theologies lies in the power of women empowering women, which is one of the liberating templates of "Theologies of African Women". Adichie introduced the character of Auntie Ifeoma, and she appeared in all the resisting strategies mentioned in the book as a role model to empower women in every aspect of their experiences of oppression. With many other works, Adichie has contributed immensely in featuring the stories of African women as such that need to be addressed in many fronts to confront all the factors that contribute to the oppression of women at all levels. She has remained a strong voice in the circle of African women whose social, religious, and political thoughts about the liberation of women have continued to enforce changes and encourage the empowerment of women in all sectors.

Through *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie has killed patriarchy, and theologically allowed women to live fulfilled lives in a post patriarchal space. While this post patriarchal universe is apparently characterized by many challenges of psychotic breakdown, and new immigrant identity, Adichie allowed her female characters to brace the contours of this new world. The emancipation of these women comes with great cost, and thus plunged both genders down. Christian theology in its liberational and feminist circles must continually resonate or engage not only the destruction of patriarchy, but the disorder, or the *dis-othering* that comes with this gender dismantling project. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie provides a theological guide through gender disorientation that characterized this creative enterprise, and the liberation theology that should forever reside in this particular dis-genderized space.

## CONCLUSION

The present study departs from past scholarship in the interpretation of *Purple Hibiscus* by underscoring its subversive and liberational theologies in conversation with patriarchy, colonization, sexism, and religion. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, African Christianity and its Catholic branch is philosophically engaged through the radical lenses of western feminism. Adichie's female characters are apparently offered liberation through murder of patriarchy in the image of Eugene, escapism by the movement of Auntie Ifeoma from Africa to America, and the psychotic breakdown of Beatrice. However, Adichie offers redemption to these female characters in the bi-character merger of Auntie Ifeoma and Beatrice who representatively confronted patriarchy, androcentric values, and oppressive structures of religion and cultures. Through this device, Beatrice and Auntie Ifeoma are the flipsides of the same characters, and together both confronted patriarchies, and charted a new horizon for themselves.

The new horizon clearly placed them in the character zones of widows, immigrant, open-minded individuals, and female rebels who challenged the biblical injunction, "thou shall not kill" in terms of Beatrice's killing her husband, or the Auntie Ifeoma's refusal of the cultural communal norm to stay forever in the land of one's ancestral birth. Together these two women experienced a liberation through their refusal to stay

happy in the hegemonic and systemic institutions of patriarchy, communal values, sexism, and colonization. Significantly, a theology of liberation, according to Adichie, would be to empower women to take the center stage in the negotiations of their own liberations and freedom by speaking up of their experiences, rejecting all gender constructs that impinge on their human rights, not submitting to any form of abuse or violence, and taking actions where necessary to resist all systems of oppressions.

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### 3 | THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE INSTITUTE OF WOMEN IN RELIGION AND CULTURE AT THE TALITHA QUMI CENTRE, LEGON GHANA FROM 1999 TO 2022

*Joyce Ewura Adwoa Boham*

#### **Abstract**

The July 1986 Nairobi conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians commissioned four groups to examine the patriarchal structures that determined African women's lives in their religious, cultural, economic and social settings. The Religion and Culture Commission, which was the fourth commission, translated into the 'Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (IWRC)' in 1999 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon Ghana. The IWRC set out as its agenda to organize public education on gender sensitivity and gender justice in religion and culture as it affects women's daily lives in Ghana. The public education targeted women, faith-based organization and traditional leaders seeking a biblical, Qur'anic and cultural hermeneutics that recognize and promote the humanity of women. The liberative theology that emanated from this approach sought to transform women's lives in their families, churches, academic and social settings. This chapter aims at highlighting the developments of the Institute from its inception in 1999 to 2022. It explores the developments of the Institute, achievements and challenges to see how the Institute has been relevant to their well-being in the areas of religion and culture.

**Keywords:** Institute of Women in Religion and Culture; Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians Talitha Qumi Centre; African Women's theology

#### **Introduction**

This paper highlights the achievements of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at the Talitha Qumi Centre, Legon Ghana in terms of creating space for liberative theological thinking and conversations about women from 1996 to 2022. It traces the activities of the Religion and Cul-

ture Commission of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) at the Talitha Qumi Centre at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon in Ghana which translated into the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (hereafter be referred to as the Institute 'and how the programs of the Institute run vis-à-vis the administrative work of the Circle. The aim is to highlight the contributions of the Institute for Ghanaian women and the way forward. To so doing, it narrates the history of the Institute and how the administration of the Circle was organized through the Institute at the Talitha Qumi Centre. The approach is a descriptive historical sketch from a participant-observer perspective.

## **Women building their own world**

The contextual setting of the mid 1990s motivated the establishment of the Institute. The period experienced a rise in the struggle for equity and development for women and for the recognition of women's innate and intellectual abilities rather than their biological worth. This was precipitated by the United Nation's Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in September 1995, asking for equity, development, and peace for all women. The struggle for the recognition and inclusion of women at tables for decision making in faith-based organizations, political spaces, educational institutions, and cultural settings had also picked up among African women. These issues presented, came up in church and other religious institutions and their affiliated branches. The church for some time had struggled with the debate on women's ordination, women's participation in liturgy, the recognition of women through liturgical language, women's place in the administration of the church and other activities as were undertaken by the church. Religion and culture permeate African women's lives in many ways presenting themselves in many forms that not only give hope but also hinders the growth of women.

The challenges presented by religion and culture for women formed the basis of the establishment of the Institute. Thus, creating spaces for women that has been part of the Liberation theology movement to transform women's lives in their families, churches, academic and social settings is very significant. Juta, asserted that women's leadership in the political and social arena was also beginning to pick up and needed advocacy

from women's movements to increase the pace (Juta, 2014:254). In all, the struggle to examine the patriarchal nature of structures against women is still ongoing. Harmful cultural practices such as marriage of minors, inhumane widowhood rights, elderly women tagged as witches, women and girls trafficking, 'trokosi'<sup>1</sup> (the slavery of girls), discrimination against women, verbal, physical, and psychological violence against women were but a few of the norms that characterized African communities and are still not over.

## The Birth of the Institute

The women's concerns and challenges over the years had been no respecter of culture, religion, nor educational background. The solidarity built on the commonality of struggles became the basis for the sisterhood that held women together to forge ahead. It is that sisterhood that motivated Prof. Constance Buchanan to fight in Harvard Divinity School to allow Third World women Theologians (as they were called then) including Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (nee Yamoah) to join a team of international scholars to lecture their Women in Religion Class of in 1983. That singular act gave birth to many programs. among others a formal organ whose focus would be to encourage, empower and mentor African women Theologians, to research, write and publish their own theologies, a theology that stresses the need to imitate Jesus' status quo of humanity. This was the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

After the creation of the Circle in 1989, African women started to made various strides to establish themselves in the fight for empowerment. The 1996 Nairobi conference saw the need to create commissions that were to focus on various aspect of the Circle's work. For this purpose, some commissions were instituted: the Commission for the Ordained Women, Commission on Biblical Studies, and the Commission on Reli-

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional system in the Eastern part of Ghana specifically in Adidome in the Volta Region. In this systems, young girls (usually virgins) are sent to live in the shrine of a fetish priest to atone for the sins committed by a male member of her family. These girls live and have children for the fetish priest which automatically renders them outcast in their community.

gion and Culture which was led by Drs. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah and Sr. Anne Nasimiyu Wasike. Dr. Mercy Oduyoye was at the time working with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, while Prof. Elizabeth Amoah worked at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Ghana, Legon with Dr. Nasimiyu employed by the Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya as a lecturer with the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. These women theologians decided to create an Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture and set out to look for funding.

The initial startup grant, which was to run for a five-year period, was given by the Ford Foundation in America to help fund the Institute. One of the conditions for the grant was for the Institute to be attached to an existing educational or religious institution and to focus on women. At that time, Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye had returned home on retirement from her position at the World Council of Churches as the Deputy General Secretary and joined hands with Prof. Elizabeth Amoah and Prof. Rabbiatu Ammah who were then lecturers at the University of Ghana, and Rev. Laurene Nyarko the late Rev. Rachael Etrue Tetteh, an ordained Minister with the Methodist Church Ghana, and Rev. Dinah Abbey-Mensah of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana. Hence, as a founder of the Circle and the leader of the Commission on Religion and Culture, Mercy Oduyoye led her colleagues to begin a public education Centre to educate all women including those at the grassroots of society while championing the concerns of The Circle to promote research and publication. The project was therefore named the “Institute of Women in Religion and Culture”.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, a body that had just brought together women theologians in Africa to write and publish women’s voices and their experiences of religion and culture had just begun its work. The founder, Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye working then as the lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan had searched and brought together sixty-nine (69) women from all over the African Continent encouraging them to publish and write while encouraging others to go into theological education with the aim of increasing women’s participation and voices in the theological space. However, the issues written and published by the women theologians

only stayed as literature available for only those who could and cared to read them. This left out the stories and experiences of a huge number of women in the church, market, farms, homes, schools, villages, and various communities on the continent.

Per the requirement of Ford Foundation, Mercy's love for ecumenism, and her personal attachment to her father who had worked as a tutor at Trinity College in Kumasi, (now Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana after it was relocated to Accra) in the late 40s and early 50s. The Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon being an ecumenical theological institution that trains ministers for the five sponsoring churches (The Methodist Church Ghana, Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana, AME Zion Church, and Anglican Diocese of Accra), became a fertile ground to plant the Institute.

The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (IWRC) was thus inaugurated at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1999 with a passion to empower African women for the third millennium. The Institute rested on the shoulders of volunteers working with a board. The Advisory Board to whom the Director reported the day-to-day management of the Institute was chaired by Rev. Dr. AA Akrong from the Department of African Studies of the University of Ghana. The members were:

*Rev. Dr. AA Akrong* –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

*Rev. Dr. Dan Antwi* – President of the Seminary

*Dr. Rabiatu Ammah* –

University of Ghana/Department for the Study of Religions

*Dr. Elizabeth Amoah* –

University of Ghana/Department for the Study of Religions

*Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro* – World Young Women's Christian Association

*Rev. Lorene Nyarko* – Methodist Church Ghana

*Rev. Dinah Abbey Mensah* – Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana

*Ms. Esther Ofei-Aboagye* –

Director of the Social Welfare Department Ghana



*Dr. Irene Odotei* –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

*Prof. Sam Addo* –

University of Cape Coast/Department of African Studies

Rev Prof. Emmanuel A. Obeng –

University of Cape Coast/Department of African Studies

*Mr. Kwasi Sam-Woode* – Director Samwoode Publications

*Fr. Paul Bekye* –

University of Ghana/Department of African Studies

*Rev. Lily Oteng-Yeboah* – Presbyterian Church of Ghana

*Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Asante* –

Vice President of the Trinity Theological Seminary

*Mr. J.A. Addy* – Finance Officer of the Seminary

*Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye* – Director of the Institute

Mrs. *Joyce Boham* and Mrs. *Lily Joy* were the only stipend members of staff at the Institute who were helped by various temporary staff volunteers.

The inaugural gathering was attended by the clergy, faculty members from various tertiary institutions, seminarians, students in religious studies, Muslim women groups, Christian women groups, and Queen Mothers. From a one-room for students' residence turned into an office at the Women's Hall, now Megill-Baeta-Jiage Hall, the Institute started its work emphasizing on the need for gender sensitivity and gender justice in the Ghanaian Community with a hope to encourage a change in the people's attitudes towards women.

The Institute also worked closely with the Circle. At that time, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro had been elected as the first General Coordinator of The Circle during the Nairobi 1996 conference. Dr. Mercy Oduyoye, the Founder and mother to The Circle and the Frist Director of the Institute together with Prof. Elizabeth Amoah introduced Joyce Boham to work as the Personal Assistant to Prof. Kanyoro and the Liaison officer for the Circle while working at the same time for the Institute as administrative assistant to Mercy Oduyoye. Between 1996 and 2001, all local Circle conferences and Pan African Conferences were planned and implemented

through the Institute. This arrangement was necessitated by the fact that Dr. Kanyoro was based in Geneva working with the World YWCA.

The uniqueness of the work of the Institute as a multi-faith centre gained recognition from many in the academic settings throughout the world, drawing students and faculty from far and wide to participate in the movement. The Institute focused on intensifying the struggle against fundamentalist and anti-women uses of the Bible, encouraging the re-reading of the Bible while recognizing its cultural biases. It also focused on emphasising the need for theological education and ministerial formation for women, pushing for cross gender discussions, and seeking the recognition of African women's theologies to be at the heart of global women's theologies among others. The Institute became the resource centre for students, lecturers, and theologians who were interested in women's voices on religion and culture. Though not a formal place of study with paid staff or lecturers, the leadership of the Ghana Circle managed the Institute on voluntarily basis. Through the selflessness of the women who worked on voluntary basis and prudent management of the five-year Ford Foundation grant, the programmes of the Institute were stretched to cover two more years in addition to the expected five year that was required by the project. After a couple of years, the work of the Institute spread over three rooms at the women's Hall, prompting the need to relocate.

## **The Institute as the Ghana Circle**

The success of the Regional Circle group from 1999 to 2002, especially in organizing the logistics for conferences at zonal and national levels could not have been achieved without the strong support system it enjoyed from the Institute. Members of the Ghana Circle voluntarily worked for long hours, sometimes spending their own resources, to see the growth and success of the Institute. All these were possible by the able leadership of Prof. Elizabeth Amoah, Prof. Rabiatu Ammah, Dr. Lorene Rosemary Nyarko, and Rev. Dinah Abbey Mensah. The passion for the success of the work of the Circle was strong enough to accommodate all criticisms and penalizations that questioned their commitment as mothers, as well

as their official responsibilities as female faculty members of their universities and female ministers in their various churches. Hence, the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture was for the first seven years of its inauguration the home and nerve Centre for the administrative activities of the Circle.

In consultation with the then Principal of the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon then, Rev. Dr. Dan Antwi, and the Governing Council of the seminary allocated a space at the southern section of their land where the students used to have a fishpond for the construction of offices for the Institute. The design of the Talitha Qumi Centre is a symbol of a woman (the Ekuaba doll) with four (4) heads meeting at the center from angles. The head, known as the Plenary Hall, is shaped in a circle, a round space where the women met to discuss issues affecting them without intimidation. In this space, the women would sit in a circle during meetings to indicate their oneness and solidarity. The four wings symbolize how women are drawn from the North, South, East and West to the centre. Mr. Kwame Boham and Dr. Amankwah supported the building projects of the Institute with their Engineering know how while Mr. John Blay created the logo of the Institute



The Four Wing facility has a two hundred and fifty (250) seater conference hall, a fourteen (14) double bed dormitory rooms with ten (10) office rooms and a library, librarian's office, bookstore, and storeroom. The dormitory wings are to serve as accommodation for participants at events organized by the Institute. The office (or the flexi wing as it was called) has one room reserved as a playroom for women who may have come for seminars with their babies.

From 1997 to 2007 every fund that was raised, including stipends and gifts from Mercy's personal work was channeled into the building of the Institute named the Talitha Qumi Centre. The project begun with the Director's Residence and a garage now named the Hearth. By 2010, the

three rooms at the women's hall were becoming too small for the work so the Institute had to move to the Hearth as a temporary office. The relocation also made the rooms available for more female student intake at the Seminary. The completion of the Talitha Qumi Centre was crucial for the creation of a safe space where women would come to discuss issues that troubled their well-being without intimidation. In 2012, the Institute moved its administrative workspace from the Hearth into the Talitha Qumi Centre to make room for accommodating some participants during conferences as the Hearth while then Director, continued to live in her own residence. Presently, the Hearth serves as a temporary accommodation for male students from the Galeo hall of the Trinity Theological Seminary, whose hall is being renovated.

The presence of the Institute at the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon made the Director, Prof. Mercy Oduyoye join the teaching faculty of the Seminary. She made a great contribution to women and gender studies by virtue of her wealth of knowledge and experience. The Institute contributed in building the image of the Seminary, especially in seeking full accreditation as a Chartered Institution authorized to award its own degrees. Prof. Mercy Oduyoye retired for the second time in 2017 from the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture as its first director, with a hope that her work and vision would be continued by the Seminary that first welcomed and provided its initial accommodation.

In 2002 the leadership of the Circle moved from Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro to Dr. Isabel Phiri. In 2016, the relationship between the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, the Talitha Qumi Centre and the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon was revisited. The President of the Seminary was Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante. It was agreed after series of meetings that the Trinity Theological Seminary absorbs the Talitha Qumi Centre and the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture. The Seminary was to appoint a new management board under which the programs of the Institute was to continue. In September 2017, Mrs. Joyce Boham was appointed as the manager of the Institute and became a Seminary Staff when the Director, Prof. Mercy Oduyoye proceeded on retirement.

## Partnerships and Fundraising

The work of the Institute has been possible through the help of other organizations, associations and agencies as well as the women themselves. These groups were made up of both local and global partners such as Fellowship of the Least Coin, Presbyterian Church USA – Women, United Methodist Church USA – Women, Basel Mission, Evangelisches Missions WERK, Global Fund for Women and Fund to Aid Protestant.

Apart from these groups the Institute generated funds internally through two main projects. The first was ‘Naming our mothers’ – a project created to honor the names of the women who have played significant roles in their lives. The names of mothers, daughters, queens, spouses, healers, women who founded clans and villages..., in order that their names are not lost to posterity. For this project donors were encouraged to donate an amount of money in honor of these significant women in their lives. The Second fundraising project was named “Women in Mission’ – a project dedicated to recalling the names and stories of women who have contributed to mission work in Ghana but whose names were missing in the narratives of Christianity in Ghana but only found in the Mission Cemeteries i.e Abokobi Presbyterian Cemetery.

## Some key events organized by the Institute

Activities at followed a planned schedule. The months of January and February were for focus group retreats, where pertinent issues relating to the community in question would be discussed. From March to September, Way Forward Seminars were organized, which usually overlapped with National, Biennial and Pan African conference organized between the months of August to October.

The Way Forward seminars were held in most of the regions in Ghana. This was a public education to discuss issues that concerned the regions in Ghana. The Way Forward Seminars were held in cities and towns that had a large number of churches, mosques, and educational institutions to get people of faith, women and men, groups and individuals together. Notable among the Way Forward Seminars were in Cape Coast, Ho, Adidome, Kumasi, Sunyani, Bolgatanga, Abetifi, Peki, Ho,

Abokobi, Greater Accra, Winneba, Wa, Gambaga. The focus was to un-mute women's voices and to throw light on the margins of society in a hope to establish religion as a life-giving and life-enhancing factor in every woman's life. The Way Forward seminars were usually a three-day program with the first day being the opening Ceremony. This was followed by a two-day residential workshop for about 30 selected people. At the workshop, papers are read on the relevant issues with a view to finding ways of involving Faith Communities and Theological Institutions in discussing what is at stake and to recommend ways of participating in bringing about life enhancing changes.

The following are some of the conferences and seminars held:

- The Institute organized the Circle's Pan-African Conference held in Nairobi from the 24th of August to 3rd of September 1996. The conference was attended by about one hundred and fifty participants from about twenty countries under the theme "Hospitality in the Household of God."
- Following the Pan-African conference held in September 1996 in Nairobi, the Institute helped the English-Speaking West Africa Circle to organize a follow-up conference themed the Earth belongs to God, which concluded that where God Reigns, women feel safe and prosper as an integral part of the commonwealth of God's creation. From this conference came the book 'Where God Reigns'.
- On the 17th of March 2000, the Institute had its first national conference at the Talitha Qumi Centre on the theme 'Overcoming Violence Against Women: A Challenge to Ghana's Faith Communities.' Participants of the conference also included women's groups from both Charismatic and Pentecostal churches.
- From the 27th-29th September 2000, the Institute held a workshop on Gender Sensitivity in Accra under the theme, 'Women of Faith Searching for Equality and Development in the year 2000 and Beyond.' This was attended by church women's groups from various churches including but not limited to the Presbyterian, Methodist and Evangelical Presbyterian Churches in Accra. Ghana Muslim women's Association and the Federation of Muslim Women's Association

(FOMWAG) were also represented. So also in attendance were student representatives from the University of Ghana and Trinity Theological Seminary.

- Doubling as a project of the Ghana Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the Institute organized a Pan-African Women Theologians Conference in Accra on the theme ‘Overcoming Violence: African Women of Faith Speak.’ on 30th July 2000. In attendance for this conference were women theologians from all Circle chapters in Africa (East, West, South and Central Africa). Also, in attendance were friends of the Circle from the diaspora, various women’s groups in Ghana not forgetting the Queen mothers in Accra and some parts of the Central Region of Ghana.
- For the Central Region, Winneba also participated in the national conference from the 4th to the 9th of October 2000 discussing “New Beginnings for creating gender sensitivity in our Nation” for the various church and Muslim women’s groups in Winneba. This closed Way-forward seminars and conference for the year 2000.
- From 17th to 20th of Jan 2001, the Institute focused on the Volta Region of Ghana discussing under the theme “Contribution of the Church and Society toward the Liberation and Rehabilitation of *Trokosi* victims. This was a collaborative effort between the Ark Foundation, the Institute, and some traditional leaders in the Adidome area. After discussions and negotiations with the head of a particular shrine, some slave girls were released and set up by the Ark Foundation in sewing.
- A National Conference was organized in Accra on the theme: Religion and Human Sexuality: Focus on HIV/AIDS on 9th April 2002. The national conference was attended by women from the various churches, NGOs and students from some selected universities. The Institute together with some faculty members from the Religious Studies Department from the University of Ghana planned to focus on another angle of violence against women when they went to Gambaga looking at the issue of witchcraft.

- The Ethiopia 2002 conference was on the HIV/AIDS Pandemic in Africa. It looked at how religion and culture could be used as a resource against stigmatization and the role women theologians could play. Participants came from Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone Members coming from Eastern, Western, Southern and Central Africa as well as Circle friends from the Diaspora.
- A follow-up of the Addis 2002 Conference was the Anglophone West Africa conference held in 2003 in Ghana and 2004 in Nigeria, all reiterating the voice of the Circle on the use of religion and culture in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the role of African women theologians.
- From the 23rd-27th April 2003, a Way Forward Seminar was organized for the people of Gambaga on the theme: Probing the Religious Roots of Witchcraft. The inmate of the Gambaga witches camp were visited and presented with cloths and other items. The Gambaga experience necessitated further discussion on the theme.
- On the 6th of October 2003, a Pan-African Conference on Culture, Religion and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS was held by the Centre. The Keynote speaker then, Prof. S.A. Amoah from the Ghana AIDS Commission educated participants who were Circle members from East, West and Southern Africa as well as sisters from the Diaspora on the key roles religion and culture plays in dealing with the pandemic.
- A conference in Kumasi on the theme 'Witches, Widows and Women's Wisdom: The Tradition Continues' was held on the 20th of September 2004 for Women's Fellowship members of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Kumasi.
- Another national conference was organized from 28th-31st August 2006 on the theme: Disempowering Language: Women Are Their Own Enemies. The discussion which took place in the form of a debate was interesting with students from the Religious Studies department from the University of Ghana and Trinity Theological Seminary debating on the theme.
- On the 23rd of May 2007, there was a one-day conference on the theme: Ghana @ 50: Women of Faith Celebrate the Future held at the University of Ghana Legon for all stakeholders.



- Between 2007 and 2014 the Institute held seminars at Kumasi, Cape Coast, Adidome, and Koforidua to discuss widowhood rites and the killing of women before and during national elections. The Adidome seminar also focused on *Trokosi* while the Koforidua seminar also focused on bead making.
- In 2015 attention of events were turned towards the safety of the girl child with a particular interest in the Kayayos in Accra. Based on this a Seminar was organized at the Talitha Qumi Centre on the theme “Creating Safe Spaces for Women and Girls: The Role of Religion.” The event brought together church women’s group, Muslim women’s groups and some Kayayos from Madina in Accra.
- The 2016 Election was a major election for Ghana and the Institute found it necessary to conscientize the women to ensure that the youth stayed out of trouble. To address this, a seminar was organized on the theme: Towards Peaceful Elections: The Role of Religion and Culture.
- In 2017 two conferences were organized. One focused on the marriage of minors with a focus on “The Role of Religion and Culture in the Marriage of Minors”, and the other was on the interpretation of Masculinity in Africa in the 21st Century. The one-day conference on Masculinity in Africa: Tradition and Modernity” sought to draw attention to how sons were raised in the past and to decide whether the same strategy was suitable for the 21st Century.
- In 2018 Institute turned its attention to women’s health looking at breast cancer. The Institute organized a “Public Education on Breast Cancer: The Role of the Church”. The event attended by representatives of church and Muslim women’s groups, students and staff of the Seminary, faculty of the Seminary and Ghana Circle Members gave opportunities for free screening to those who so wanted. At this event were also dieticians from the 37 Military Hospital to teach the participants of health eating habits.
- Since 2018 the major program of the Institute has been the Gender Studies in Ministry program organized for the Seminarians. The studies are grouped under four (4) thematic areas: Sociology of Gender in Ministry, Legal issues of Gender in Ministry, Theological issues of Gender in Ministry, and Biblical Issues of Gender in Ministry.

## Publications

The publications and circulars were for the benefit of those who were working on issues of gender as the experiences of women in the front line. However, behind it was the vision to encourage African women to write their own stories. These publications served as evidence of the voices and experiences of women on the cultural and religious issues raised. The notable books are:

1. *Transforming Power: Women in the household of God*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye, from the proceedings of the Circle's Pan-African Conference in 1996.
2. *“Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God’s World”*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and published in 1996.
3. *When Silence Is No Longer an Option*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Oduyoye and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
4. *Too Painful to Tell*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Rabiātu Ammah and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
5. *Poems of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, edited by Elizabeth Amoah and Pamela Martin and published in 2001 by Sam-Wood Ltd.
6. *Women in Religion and Culture, Essays in Honor of Constance Buchanan*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and published in 2007.

## Relevance of the Institute

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that the Institute has made an impact in the lives of women in Africa and in Ghana in particular. First, many women have come to appreciate the need to address religious and cultural practices that work against the lives of women.

Oduyoye (2007), describes African religion and culture as plagued with gender insensitivity and sexism, diseases which according to her, can only be cured through a collaborative and conscious effort by African women and men who are ready to re-examine culture and religion for their disempowering traits and suppressing roles. African women's theology draws much from women's experience and not theology that is remote and removed from their daily living, yet holding on to the Bible.

Oduyoye, points out that for the African women theologians, however, the Bible cannot be the only norm because, “any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless (2001:12).” At least, if the Bible teaches that in Christ there is no male or female, it should not be hard to accept but that is not the case. It takes a conscious effort and plan to help society embrace the word of God and that is what the Institute has been doing. In the same way, the biblical texts of terror used to sideline and control women has been highlighted leading to renewed interpretations that affirm both men and women in need of the grace of God. The physical and psychological damage caused by religion in the past through the advocacy of the Institute is being transformed by God.

African women have explored new ways of reading the Bible. For example, Prof. Musa Dube explains *Talitha Cum* hermeneutics as derived from the term *talitha cum* in the Markan story of Mark 5:21-43. This approach captures the imagination of African women theologians, represents the struggles of African women against colonial powers and patriarchal oppression, with the highly desired results of liberation and life, provides hope for gender empowerment, and is magnetic to African women since it embodies the arts of hope, healing, resurrection, and liberation (2009). Dube, sums this up by saying, “*Talitha cum* African women’s hermeneutics is therefore the practice of living daily in confrontation with international oppression of the past and present, gender oppression of the past and present, and physical wounds of the past and present.” (2009:133-146)

The Institute has promoted the reading of the Bible where cultural symbols are made to dialogue with the biblical text to critically examine the interaction of biblical texts with African people and their culture. Similarly, some cultural practices have impinged on the humanity of women and the Institute has advocated for the re-examination of norms and traditions that have been handed down through generations. Oduyoye (2007), points out that the Ghanaian culture is structured in a way that breeds injustice against women. The idolization of marriages, inheritance laws, harmful cultural practices and economic policies all create avenues for the perpetuation of violence and injustice against women. Oduyoye (2007), argues that African languages are full of verbal violence

that seeks to subdue and marginalize the humanity of women. Some Ghanaian idioms question women's ability and capacity to reason. For example, clichés as *Ɛmaa adwen* (literally "women's thought") is used to describe ideas that are unacceptable, hence a derogatory way to discard all contributions by women. Akitunde, also illustrates how the society uses cultural practices to brainwash women into submissiveness to men (2007:105). Sackey, argues that traditionally, women who are outstanding are also branded as witches, as they do not stay in the status quo (2007:79). Sackey, points out that those who challenged the status quo are branded as strict, strong and tough who try to rub shoulders with men and outshine them or as witches (2007:82). The Institute has consistently challenged the sense of entitlement inherent in the language to ensure that African cultures are not hostile to women and as such do not suffer verbal, mental and physical violence. According to Prof. Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, "Violence against women is not a sectarian issue; it is a human rights issue. It is a fundamental right for all humans not for one group but to all and this is what the Circle demands of the Church." (2006:41)

The Institute has advocated that a culture that limits the dignity of women to mothering and the unapologetic orientation that women's reproduction and sexuality only benefits men without recognizing women's opinion or choices, keeps women in check, mutilates their intellect capacities by linking their worthiness is derived only from being obedient to the culture. That does not mean African women are kicking against culture. In the words of Musimbi Kanyaro in Njoroge and Dube, "African women are custodians of cultural practices; for generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women objects of cultural preservation." (2001:159). The Institute has created avenues where women can speak against cultures that subdue and marginalize women. It has empowered women and men to recognize the humanity of women and address issues of violence, inhumane cultural practices and exploitative belief systems, that disempower, marginalize, and subdue women handed through generations.

The achievements of the Institute are not without challenges. First, the major problem has to do with people of faith putting hurdles in the way of the Institute to empower women. Some heads of institutions, pastors, and religious women leaders do not encourage women under their care to take advantage of programs organized by the Institute. Second, the foundations of the Institute built on voluntary and sacrificial services has waned after the first generation of women passed on the baton to subsequent generations. Third, the Institute, together with the Circle, has demystified theology only to those who reside in theological institutions but for all people of faith in the margins there is more to be done. Isabel Apawo Phiri wrote about a challenge a decade ago that the study of theology is linked with the ordained ministry because the initial missionaries who came to Africa, making women feeling reluctant to be part of the discipline. This challenge still persists. Phiri (2008) encourages that, more should be done to engage more women to read the Bible theologically to affect their world. Finally, the absence of a board steering the affairs of the Institute continues to create challenges for its smooth running.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the development and achievements of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture /Talitha Qumi Centre, Legon Ghana from 1996 to 2022. It established that following the Circle's inauguration in 1989, African women started to make various strides to establish themselves in the fight for empowerment. From the mid-1990s, the struggle for the recognition and inclusion of women at tables for decision making also picked up. The 1996 Nairobi conference saw the need to create commissions that were to focus on various aspect of the Circle's work. Some women theologians created the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture through an initial funding from Ford Foundation and individual donations. The Institute was located at the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon and was inaugurated on the 13th of March 1999 as the administrative arm of the Circle. By 2012, the Institute had built the Hearth and the Talitha Qumi Centre for conferences and to accommodate participants.

Through various conferences and seminars, the Institute has supported the advocacy for women empowerment, challenging religious and cultural biases against women, and helped women in entrepreneurship. Despite all these successes for over two decades, it is sad to notice that some religious leaders do not encourage women under their care to take advantage of programs organized by the Institute. Many women are not taking advantage of the open doors to study theology. Also, the voluntary spirit that was seen among the pioneers that established the Institute has gone down. However, a good seed has been planted, and God is watering it.

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## 4 | RABIATU DEINYO AMMAH ON ISLAM AND GENDER ISSUES

*Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh*

### **Abstract**

Gender injustice exists in many religious faiths including Islam. Women in Islam face subjugation, gender injustice, and dehumanization. Often, these gender-humiliating issues were derived from a certain interpretation of Qur'anic passages that relate to women. It hinders the development of the potential of women and affects them economically. This has led to protests by women in contemporary times for gender justice in Islam. Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah added that it is not only misinterpretation of Qur'anic passages but also these misinterpretations that dehumanize women and have support from gender issues in socio-cultural norms of some Arab and African societies. This study critically reviews some works of Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah concerning gender issues among women in Islam and how to tackle the problem. It is recommended that interpreters of the Qur'an on gender issues ought to adopt appropriate methods and approaches that are blurs or makes nebulous some traditional perception concerning women. The concept of the *zakat* should be upheld for the sustainable development of women in Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** Islam, women, Qur'an, interpretation, Africa, gender, dehumanize, development, *zakat*

### **A Brief Biography of Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah**

Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah, PhD is a senior lecturer at the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana. She is also a senior research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations Selly-Oak Colleges. She studied for her Diploma, Master, and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees at the University of Birmingham between 1982 and 1989. Dr. Ammah received the best teacher award for the 1999-2000 academic year and is a member of the *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* editorial board. One of the most populous works of



Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah is “Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies in the Ghanaian Muslim Community,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (2007):3-20. She is known for her multi-faith approach to gender studies. Dr. Ammah is a member of the Federation of Muslim Woman Associations Ghana (FOMWAG), and a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

## Introduction

Appropriate methods and approaches to scripture interpretation is critical in the observance of religious teachings to avoid misrepresentation and abuse. Gender issues are a serious matter in many religious organizations. In Islam, issues of dehumanizing and abusive phenomena against women have been observed. Often, these gender injustice issues are considered by non-Muslims as the teaching of the Qur’an. Women were perceived as inferior to men, therefore, can be beaten by their husbands; given into marriages against their wishes by parents or family members; and neglected in burgher marriages. It is also contended that Muslim communities are not developmental in their approach to daily activities, particularly women. Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah has responded to the issues of gender and Islam that have been critically reviewed in this study.

## Review of the Works of Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah

### *The Islamic Understanding of Creation: The Place of Women*

The position of women in the creation narrative in the Qur’an was analyzed. Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah argued that women in Islam are concerned with gender issues relating to their position in relation to men and the profession of women. The work started with an epithet from Shariati, an Iranian Muslim woman: “Who am I? Am I a mother? A wife? A biologist? A chemist? A doctor, nurse, midwife, labourer, writer, human being? Who am I?” (Ammah, 1997:26). These questions mainly portray the dilemma of the Muslim woman concerning identity. The questions were rhetorically arranged to emphasize Muslim women’s distinctiveness such that it started with the question of identity, supply some responses relating to the family, sciences, and the arts, and then ended

with the question concerning identity. It demonstrates how concerned the Muslim woman is concerned about gender identity and construction. Ammah puts it thus “these questions and related issues touch the heart and minds of the Muslim woman, who for centuries have been relegated to the background, pushed to the wall and excluded from active participation in public affairs” (Ammah, 1997:26). She reasoned that this gender stereotyping image of women is due to centuries of misinterpretation of some Qur’anic passages to keep Muslim women subjugated and subservient to men (Ammah, 1997:26).

Rabiatu identified three modes of interpretation as the contributing factors for the misinterpretation of the Qur’an leading to the subjugation of Muslim women. **(i)** Some contemporary scholars consider the poor and handicap of women in society to shape their interpretation of gender related passages; **(ii)** lack of linking and drawing systematic understanding of related ideas, themes, and principles together; **(iii)** most of the interpretation were done by men, therefore, failed to take along women experiences in the interpretative process. Women’s issues were excluded or marginalized during the interpretation of the Qur’an (Ammah, 1997:27). The first group of interpreters do not allow the text of the Qur’an to dictate the meaning of the passage concerning women. Probably, they are protective of the male dominance over females thereby making the Qur’an appear as anti-women, which is not the case. The second group of interpreters do isolated proof-texting, which begs the question of whether those secluded texts humiliate women. The third group is the patriarchal approach to the interpretation of the Qur’an, which is biased towards men. All three groups of misinterpretation of the Qur’an are heavily hinged on patriarchy. Ammah set forth to investigate whether the creation narrative and the lessons it teaches present women as inferior and subservient.

Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah referred to the creation narrative in the Qur’an chapter 4:1 “O mankind reverence your guardian – Lord who created you for a single person. Created, of like nature, His mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women.” She commented that often, the preposition *min* (from – extraction) in Arabic as used in the interpretation of the verse is disastrous for women because it connotes the idea that the woman was created from the man. “This mode

of interpretation came to mean that the first created being was a man perfect, superior, and complete. The second was not his equal. This made the latter inferior and contingent on the former” (Ammah, 1997:31). Ammah (1997:33) argued that *min* has an alternative function to be understood as “of the same nature as” but this alternative usage is neglected in order to agree with the Judeo-Christian concept of the creation of man and woman. The Qur’an places man and woman on the same pedestal because “the woman is given responsibilities which are not different from those of man.” She buttressed this statement with the duties assigned to Mary in the Qur’an 66:12 being the same as to men. “And Mary the daughter of Imran, who guarded Her chastity; and we breathed into her body of our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of his revelations, and was one of the devout servants.” Ammah concluded that from the perspective of the Qur’an creation narrative and the role of Mary, there is no primordial distinction between a man and a woman that make the man superior and the woman inferior.

The analysis of the creation narrative by Ammah was heavily focused on the alternative meaning of *min* “of the same nature as” instead of the commonly and popularly “from”. It gives a clue for the interpreters of the creation narrative in the Qur’an to critically consider gender equality perspective of the text. The religious duties of Mary as an icon of “purity, perfection, spirituality, and perfection” (Ammah, 1997:35), point to the fact that women can be empowered and instructed by God to perform roles that were popular with men. The work suggests a serious study of the various syntaxes and morphologies of the Arabic language in the interpretation of the Qur’an that does not create class superiority among the genders. However, it can be queried that the empowerment of Mary to be assigned duties equal to men may be premised on the fact that she would be the mother of Jesus (Ammah, 1997:35).

### ***Perspectives on the Qur’an Verse on Wife Beating in the Ghanaian Muslim Community***

Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah continued with her objective of raising attention and correcting issues relating to Qur’an passages that have been interpreted to subjugate women and make them appear inferior to men. In this publication, Ammah (2013:333-373) deliberated on the critical issue

of wife beating in Muslim communities in Ghana and how it may constitute domestic violence against women. The work began with a philosophical quote “tap, beat, beat but with a handkerchief or tapping to beat; the value is the same.” The question demonstrates the quandary concerning wife beating in Muslim communities in Ghana and the quest to know the Qur’an stipulation about the beating of married women by their husbands.

Qur’an 4:34 states that:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devotedly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, and (last) beat them (slightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance; for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all).

Ammah (2013:338-350) referred to varied interpretations of the text by exegetes to mean that **(i)** husbands can beat their wives who are disobedient; and **(ii)** husbands have the right to punish their wives, not necessarily beating them. She referred to these interpretations as proof-texting that has been blindly accepted by many Muslim communities. Fieldwork in Nima to interview some respondents concerning wife beating was undertaken. Most of them confirmed that wife beating is rampant among community members, and often reference is made to Qur’an 4:34. Many of the respondents who were victims of wife beating do not see the need to report the incident to the Domestic Violence Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) because they do not consider it in that category but rather report it to the *Imam* (Islamic religious leader). In one of the responses of the *Iman* to the victim (wife) he

...advised her that her husband is her guardian, and God had decreed that a beating is not in this case a transgression. If she is seeking divorce, this is not a sufficient a cause because an opportunity to perfect humility is hardly a loss. If you have a disobeyed, the *Imam* said, then you are a deviant. A *nashiz* in the book of God is an arrogant woman who does not see her husband as her boss (Ammah, 2013:365).

The situation leaves wives with limited options concerning wife beating. It has made them become ‘punching bags’ for some husbands (Ammah, 2013:367). Ammah argued that the traditional views concerning the interpretation of Q4:34 are not in tandem with the spirit of the Qur’an and Islam. She stated that the wife’s “beating was part of the customary practices of the Arabs and though the Qur’an did not introduce the beating of women; it has to deal with it appropriately and pragmatically as it was ugly and in conflict with the beauty of Islam” (Ammah, 2013:344). There is growing evidence that *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic Arabia) cultural norms such as female infanticide, women not being given the right to inherit their fathers, wife beating, and exorbitant marriage dowry are prevalent in Muslim communities in Ghana, which are not Qur’anic (Saleh, 1997:80-87). It may suggest that wife beating was not original to Islam but the adoption of Arab cultural norms that received a wider acceptance by many Muslim communities. Whether it is tapping, beating with handkerchiefs or feathers it does not reflect Islam as a religion of peace. Ammah admonishes Muslim women to use the Domestic Violence Law in Ghana to address the wife beating phenomenon in Muslim communities (Ammah, 2013:368). It is significant for Ammah to examine the Muslim women in the communities and whether they would be willing to read the Domestic Violence Law, understand, and apply it in ways that do not make the woman exercise too much authority over the husband according to Islamic family unit. Not only the women but the men have to be educated or read the Domestic Violence Law for a happy Islamic family entity.

Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah offered to exegetes of the Qur’an to consider interpretations that easily resonate with the spirit of the Qur’an and Islam rather than literal readings of some verses of the Qur’an. In other words, whatever method or approach is used by an exegete must not conflict with the core objective of the Qur’an and Islam. When there is conflict, the spirit and objective of the Qur’an and Islam must prevail. It will be more insightful for Ammah to develop a method for Qur’anic exegesis rather than asking the exegete to consider the spirit and objective of the Qur’an and Islam because the method would consider the spirit and objective of the Qur’an in the process of designing the method.

### ***Violence against Women in Ghanaian Muslim Communities***

This publication seems to emphasize the views expressed in the above two works concerning the misinterpretation of gender passages in the Qur'an that dehumanizes and abuse women. In this publication, Rabiatu Ammah-Koney (2009:159-191) argued that the lifestyle of some Muslims in the communities is not reflective of the teaching of the Qur'an but of some cultural influences on Islam and misinterpretation of Qur'anic passages. She stated that "the Qur'an liberated women centuries ago and does not dehumanize them, or give them an inferior position" (Ammah-Koney, 2009:159). Ammah-Koney (2009:175) explained that Islam is the first religion to have liberated women and call for their honoured position in society. However, research in Alarba in the Ashanti Region, and Nima in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana show that Muslim women undergo various forms of dehumanizing and abusive treatment from their male counterparts.

The main cause of this phenomenon in Alarba and Nima is forced marriage which also exists in traditional societies in Ghana. It is usually young women of school going age that are forced into these marriages and thereby jeopardizing their future careers and becoming reliant on men (husbands) for sustenance. Ammah-Koney narrated the ordeal of a young respondent in Nima.

She had been in her first year at the West Africa Secondary School when her father died. She was asked to marry a rich man by her uncle, through whom a proposal had been made. She vehemently protested as she wanted to continue her education. However, after several beatings by family members, she was obliged to marry him, only to run away from the marital home. After several months of unsuccessful intensive searching, the marriage was annulled on account of her absence, at the request of the husband in consultation with the uncle (Ammah-Koney, 2009:177).

A student in the first year of Senior High School in Ghana would be between 15 and 17 years. The quest for her to marry a rich man may be due to the fact that the mother, if alive, did not have the economic sophistication to take care of the girl through secondary education. Hence, marriage to a rich person, but the marriage was not meant to help the lady

continue her education but to settle and procreate as a wife. The stigma of a married lady among other single girls in secondary school demonstrates the end of education for the girl. And it appears that some rich men cannot take care of girls to school without marrying or taking advantage of them sexually. The numerous instructions in the *Ahadith* for parents and guardians not to force their children into unwanted marriages have been ignored (Ammah-Koney, 2009:177).

The other problem identified by Ammah-Koney in some Muslim communities is the issue of burgher marriage. Although this type of marriage is not explicitly stated or inferred in the Qur'an, many Muslims encourage their daughters into such marriages for economic well-being and improved social status. This form of marriage is aided by the assumption that there are not enough men to marry or that the men living in Ghana are unable to perform the Islamic and traditional customary marriage rites that have become very expensive. Ladies in these burgher marriages hope to join their husbands abroad, which in some cases do not know them personally but through photographs or personally knew the man very little. The ladies move to live with the parents or extended family members of the man, which later creates problems such that the ladies later become as if they were domestic staff of the parents of the man (Ammah-Koney, 2009:179-181). Some respondents stated that "I am 23 and have been married for 2 years and saw him only twice before the marriage which was performed in his absence. I have lost weight, feel lonely and don't have any freedom because of my mother in-law and sister in-law.... I will not advise anybody to go into such a marriage as I face a lot of hunger, persistent sickness and lack of sexual satisfaction" (Ammah-Koney, 2009:181). Women have no instruction concerning how to deal with husbands who misbehave besides reporting the issue to the *Imams*. Men who marry young girls, and in burgher marriages do not take seriously the earlier portion of Qur'an 4:34 that states "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women...". In that regard, the Islamic Research (of the *Ahl ul Sunna Wa Jama'at*), The Federation of Muslim Women Association in Ghana (FOMWAG), and the office of the National Chief Imam have decided to take up the issues of women to improve their well-being in marriage and the community (Ammah-Koney, 2009:184-185).

Marriage counselling is an important activity for would-be Muslim couples. It will be very significant for Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah to indicate whether individuals in forced marriages and burgher marriages undergo pre-marital counselling. This is not to argue that the traditional system of pre-marital counselling which is conducted by the *Aluwanka* and a more contemporary system introduced by Hajia Memuna Maliki is without limitation or gives immunity to challenges in marriage (Ammah and Khamis, 2016:118-131). However, it is likely that persons who undergo any of these forms of pre-marital counselling would live above certain levels in a marital relationship not to dehumanize and abuse wives.

In the study, Ammah raised two critical issues seeking scholarly and religious attention to improve the lives of women in Muslim communities. Religion and cultural, and religion and economic well-being. These issues are driving men to dehumanize and abuse women. The influence of culture and economic choices seem to make non-Muslims accept or speculate that those lifestyles are sanctioned by the Qur'an which is false. It calls for a study of how the Qur'an, culture, and economic well-being should interface without making the teaching of the Qur'an nebulous. In fact, culture has been an element that can unconsciously drift into a religious practice easily. If it is not detected and dealt with, it is considered by outsiders as part of a religious group's teaching. Richard Niebuhr (1956) has argued that for the Christian faith, whatever culture is prevalent among the people the message of Jesus Christ must be presented to transform the culture in innovative and creative ways that do not relegate the message of the gospel or present the culture in a derogative manner. It is hinged on the critical issues of Christ against culture; the Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture in paradox; Christ the transformer of culture. Ammah would have to consider the work of Niebuhr to determine how Islam and other cultures would interface or co-exist.



## Gender and Sustainable Development in Muslim Communities in Ghana

### *Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies Attempts at dealing with Poverty in the Ghanaian Muslim Community*

The object of the study is to consider the resources provided by the Qur'an for poverty reduction in Muslim communities in Ghana. The work examined the concept of *zakat* and *sadaqah* to fight poverty. According to Ammah (2007:3-20), humans are multi-dimensional beings and have basic needs, hence, the fundamental concern of Islam is the basic welfare of all humans that establishes peace and harmony on the earth. "The Qur'an sees humanity to be one community (*ummah*). This *ummah* is the best created by Allah and enjoined social responsibility to call people to what is good and forbid indecency" (Ammah, 2007:3). The *ummah* is composed of both the rich and the poor. The Qur'an does not give justification for poverty, which may be caused by power concentration, attitude, ideology etc. Poverty in Muslim communities is caused by power concentration and ideological factors. The Northern parts of Ghana where Muslims dominate the population are rural communities that lack among others educational infrastructure. Many Muslims consider attending missionary colonial schools as proselyting so they refused to attend school. Hence, poverty in Muslim communities is mainly caused by a lack of education (Ammah, 2007:12-13). Whatever form of poverty may show up the Qur'an made provisions through *zakat* and *sadaqah* (a voluntary and involuntary mechanism) to assuage it. It speaks to the conscience of Muslims concerning their social responsibility to the poor in society. Some poor and physically challenged persons have taken advantage of this stipulation to be present at many Mosques and vantage streets to beg for alms usually referred to as *fisahbilillah* – in the name of Allah (Ammah, 2007:10-11).

The *zakat* is aimed at wealth redistribution and avoid wealth concentration at selected persons and location(s) in society. It improves the material well-being of the poor by the wealthy through targeted giving. In other words, the poor even though may not be active participants in the wealth creation of the rich, they are participants in the expending/disbursement of the wealth of the rich. *Sadaqah* is a voluntary giving to the

poor (Ammah, 2007:11-12). Ammah finds the *zakat* and *sadaqah* inadequate for poverty alleviation. The Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services (ICODEHS) ways of promoting economic development were through building Mosques in communities, which Ammah thinks is inappropriate, she advised them to establish factories and other businesses which will employ people in the Muslim communities which they did and take care of the orphans in Muslim communities, which is a form of *zakat* (Ammah, 2007:6-20; Weiss, 2020:272-303).

The study draws attention to religion and secular education, and religion and development. Ammah identified the importance of education for economic development probably because *zakat* and *sadaqah* though have a role in wealth redistribution, it is not prudent for the poor to totally rely on them for their sustenance. Hence, the need for education by all to be gainfully employed. The appeal to ICODEHS by Ammah was timely and effective towards poverty alleviation. Religious NGOs must critically consider the issue of responding to urgent matters of concern among the community rather than being limited to the provision of religious infrastructure. *Zakat* and *sadaqah* are not enough for poverty alleviation among women in Muslim communities. Education is critical to poverty alleviation among women in Muslim communities which would eventually lead to development. The Qur'an 96:1-5; 20:114; 39:9 encourage the acquisition of knowledge as means of dealing with issues in the *ummah* including poverty. This makes education of any form (Islamic and secular) the prerequisite for development and poverty alleviation. In addition, the concept of the *zakat* calls for more Muslims to get involved in NGO activities to lessen the burden on women in Muslim communities in Ghana (Sulemanu, 2018:243-258).

### ***Ghanaian Muslims on “Becoming Muslims” for Sustainable Development***

Muslims are beginning to apply the Qur'anic teachings concerning models of development that aid material and spiritual growth. The inability of “Muslims to live the Qur'an presents Islam as anti-development” (Ammah, 2018:227). Ammah (2018) argued that Islam is not anti-development and many individuals and NGOs of Islamic origin and nature

are deeply involved in sustainable development programmes in Muslim communities in Ghana, and women are benefiting from these programmes/projects. She posited that humans are the centre of development in Islam where development is not limited to only tangible but also includes the intangibles for holistic and sustainable growth. She identified the work of Muslims from petty trading to working in established entities as a contribution of Muslim communities for sustainable development in Ghana. The National Chief *Imam* Sheikh Dr. Usman Nuhu Sharbutu was acknowledged for establishing a school at New Fadama and his intention to establish a university under the ambit of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Ghana (FOMWAG). The Ghana Muslim Mission (The Mission) was praised for its developmental projects and activities in Muslim communities in Ghana (Ammah, 2018:233-235).

The women's group of the Mission which was formed in 1967 has contributed to the development of women in Muslim communities. The women raised funds to organize human capital development programmes for Muslim women. Some of the women have organized themselves into a traditional music (*bibidwom*) group as means of raising financial resources to aid the course of Muslim women to be entrepreneurial. The financial resources realized are used to educate Muslim women to move away from the traditional parenting for the girl-child to the Islamic mode of parenting that does not make the girl-child inferior (Ammah, 2018:240-241). In other words, the women mainly engage the concept of *zakat* and music to raise funds for women's welfare in Islamic communities. The women have now formed co-operatives to provide capital for Muslim women to be productive and support themselves through business ventures. The co-operatives are providing either interest free loans or minimal interest loans for women, thereby avoiding loans with high interest in the capital market (Ammah, 2018:241-242). This may partly reflect some Islamic patterns of financing such as *riba* (usury) Qur'an 2:275 which is forbidden among Muslims; *mudarabah* (partnership financing); and *musharakah* (multiple financing) (Abdul-Hamid, 2017).

## Discussion

The works of Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah concentrated on the appropriate interpretation of the Qur'an that does not dehumanize and abuse women, and sustainable development in Muslim communities to foster economic empowerment of women in Ghana. This session seeks to engage these two issues with what other scholars in the field have pro-pounded.

### *Scripture Interpretation*

Ammah's assertion that Qur'anic exegetes interpret the Qur'an in ways that do not resonate with the core objective of the Qur'an but reflect cultural norms that subjugate women demonstrates the need for a revision of Islamic education in Ghana. It is common knowledge that children of Muslim origins undergo almost compulsory Islamic education up till a minimum of their teenage years. This is often combined with secular education in Ghana. Secular education takes Monday to Friday while Islamic education takes Saturday and Sunday in many Islamic communities in Ghana. Islamic education is referred to as *makaranta* (purely religious schooling). The concept of the *makaranta* was to keep Muslims in their faith through teaching because secular education was initially misunderstood as Christian education. Subsequently, Islamic education was added to secular education for schools in Muslim communities and is attended from Monday to Friday. This shows that the child of an Islamic parent is occupied with a lot of studies in their formative years (Owusu, 2017). Misinterpretation of the Qur'an to favour cultural dictates and masculinity prompts the review of the *makaranta* curriculum that is mainly focused on the recitation of the Qur'an to include basic exegetical principles that do not dehumanize and abuse women. Although public interpretation of the Qur'an is often undertaken by men (Ammah, 1997:31), there is no gender limitation on the attendance of *makaranta*. Both males and females attend *makaranta*. The revision of the curriculum would prepare females to understand the position of women in Islam as taught by the Qur'an. Even though the *makaranta* system had undergone some revisions to include secular education, there is the need to revise to include basic gender balanced exegetical principles.

Islamic feminism proceeds on the premise that Allah is just. Hence, an androcentric interpretation of the Qur'an is not acceptable. It is to expose and correct gender biased issues and seemingly contradictory matters among Muslims (Abdul-Hamid, 2017). This has been reflected in many works of feminist theologians concerning Black people, decolonialization etc. (Dube, 2000, 2012:1-25, 1996:37-59; Fiorenza, 1993). Although some men are involved in this exercise, as *khalifas* of God Muslim women of the FORWAG ought to consider the creation of a wing that would concentrate on the exegesis of the Qur'an to fast-track the liberation of Muslim women through appropriate interpretation of the Qur'an (Ammah, 2014:184-202). This is expected to lead to the proposition of liberation hermeneutics for Muslim women in Ghana (West, 2014:341-382).

Appropriate interpretation of scripture for varied audiences has been an issue of concern in many religious groups. Christianity in Africa has faced this problem leading to the propositions of various methods and approaches for biblical interpretation such as mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics, intercultural biblical interpretation, and African biblical hermeneutics (Ekem, 2010:34-37; Kuwornu-Adjaotor, 2012:575-579; Loba-Mkole, 2008:1347-1364; Manus, 2003; Quarshie, 2002:4-14; Aryeh, 2016:140-160; Aryeh, 2017:182-210). The works of Ammah contribute to appropriate modes of scripture interpretation but it is tweaked towards the interpretation of gender related passages in the Qur'an. While the Christian phenomenon of appropriate interpretation of scripture is characterized by foreign interpretations that do not uphold African life and cultural norms that are not anti-biblical, the works of Ammah posit modes of interpretations that are characterized by gender justice and reflect the overall objective of Islam as a religion of peace. Ammah's works seek to confront both foreign and indigenous interpreters of the Qur'an on patriarchal cultural norms that dehumanize and abuse women. Her approach to appropriate modes of Qur'anic interpretation was gender specific.

### ***Gender and Development***

Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah's works on Islam and the development of women in the communities were defensive. It attempted to chronicle what Islamic religious leaders and NGOs have done for the economic

development of women and the community of Muslims. This is in fulfilment of the instructions of the Qur'an concerning *zakat* and *sadaqah*. The claim of Ammah is in consonance with the perspective of Rebecca Ganusah that often Christianity is seen as a religion that retards human progress and development. She catalogued the works that the Christian missionaries did for human development in Ghana to the period of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches. Ganusah (2014:203-218) argued that the establishment of trading centres, markets, building and establishment of educational infrastructure from pre-school to tertiary level, training and provision of human resources in various government and non-governmental agencies among others is a contribution of the Christian faith for development in Ghana. The difference between the proposition of Ammah and Ganusah is gender. The sustainable development issues raised by Ammah were heavily concentrated on how *zakat* has contributed to the plight of Muslim women while Ganusah's assertion was not limited to a specific gender or religion but to all Ghanaians.

Obviously, the discussion of sustainable development in Ghana cannot negate the contribution of religious groups. In many parts of Africa, religion is central to almost every activity by humans. Religion is expected to put food on the table, ensure spiritual tranquility, democracy, peace, birth-growing up-adulthood-and the afterlife is saturated in/with religious candour. Issues presented through the optics of religion are likely to receive wide acceptance. Therefore, religion is power for life and the inner tenacity to perform a task (Butselaar, 2014:219-231), including sustainable development. If the argument of Butselaar is correct then more development is expected in Africa, particularly Ghana because over 90% of the population of Ghanaians profess one faith or the other since independence (Sasu, 2023). However, the problem has to do with the over-concentration of the provision of infrastructures and the establishment of businesses by religious faiths. There is the need to move beyond these to advocacy for social re-organization and re-orientation of social systems to prepare the bases for sustainable development (Stephen, 1997:118-127). When the *ummah* is transformed to effectively appropriate the sustainable development agenda of women in Muslim communities, then many of the *zakat* activities would have a lasting effect on women including the education of girls.

## CONCLUSION

Appropriate modes of scripture interpretation are key to religious observance. They serve the critical factor of keeping faith with the meaning of ancient religious documents. These methods and approaches guard against the infiltration of foreign teachings into the core values and objectives of religious faith. Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah identified misinterpretation of gender related passages in the Qur'an and demanded gender sensitive interpretation that reflects the spirit and core objective of the Qur'an. The misinterpretation has led to the dehumanization and abuse of women which reflects the pre-Islamic cultural phenomenon of some Arabs and traditional Ghanaian societies, which is ant-Qur'an and anti-Islamic. The inferior and subservient roles assigned to women have caused intense poverty among Muslim women in their communities. Although many Muslims are involved in *zakat* activities to reduce the poverty levels among women in Muslim communities, education and re-organization of the social system to appropriate sustainable development of Muslim women. Ammah called for the perceived tension between religion and development that is not substantive. Although religion is considered to be aligned with ancient philosophies and sustainable development is the implementation of contemporary ideas, religion in Africa is the power for sustainable development and growth. What might be attractive to the ink and space, and audiences of Rabiatu Deinyo Ammah is gender and leadership in Islamic communities in Ghana: the perspective of the Qur'an.

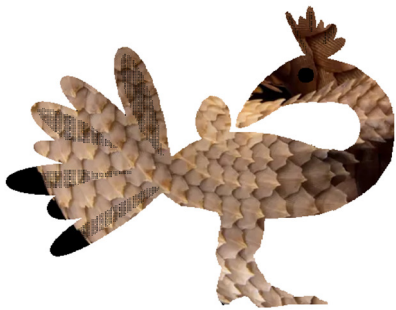
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## 5 | INTERPRETING AND RE-INTERPRETING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL BELIEFS THROUGH FEMINIST LENS IN THE WORKS OF HELEN LABEODAN

*Oluwatoyin Adebola Gbadamosi*

### Abstract

African worldviews have been understood and misunderstood within two popular contexts that were produced by neo-colonialism and the praxis of the people. First, the Western context, thereby leading to a hasty conclusion that Africans do not have a philosophy of religion and wrong juxtaposing of the African worldviews within the Western ones and *vice versa* which result to erroneous analyses and inadequate submissions. Second, the context of patriarchal narratives and mindsets, whereby practices, beliefs and views leave the feminine folk at a disadvantage. It is within these two contexts that Helen Labeodan situates her philosophical propositions and theology whereby her works interpret and re-interpret African Philosophy, especially metaphysics and cultural beliefs from a feminist perspective. This study seeks to analyse and investigate the uniqueness of her works as an African woman and philosopher who carries the burden of bequeathing a liberating theology. To this view, this study is poised to answering the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her philosophical propositions? How did her philosophical propositions address patriarchy and wrong interpretations of African Philosophy? What could be identified as the purpose of her theology? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of a West African Feminist philosopher, Helen Labeodan.

**Keywords:** Helen Labeodan, Feminist Philosophy, African Women, Metaphysics, Gender

### Introduction

Long after the exit of colonial masters from the shores of Africa, the people still grapple with the effects of the presence and control of the Europeans among them. Neo colonialism is the fruit of colonialism and it is

an influential force with which powerful nations shape the culture of the supposed weaker nations. Although this motive is often driven by economic reasons, it no doubt influences the way of life of the less powerful nations. Thus, Africans were convinced to drop their names, dressing, religion, culture and ways of life. Aspects of living that were not swayed were influenced. It is within this context that the African worldviews have been understood and also misunderstood because issues related to Africans were viewed from the Western point of view. In addition, the patriarchal nature of most African societies coloured the understanding of African worldviews whereby mindsets, practices, beliefs and views were mostly seen from the masculine perspective. These two paradigms have left the feminine folks at a very great disadvantage. The vulnerability of women became enshrined in systems which appear designed to keep them perpetually on the lowest rung of the ladder and mostly exploited. Women have remained the poorest, the least educated and least seen in the helms of power, and more worrisome is the experience of the women of colour. Although there have been some improvements in the past decades as a result of movements fighting for the emancipation of women and other feminist and womanist driven quests, the situation is still a far cry for what ought to be.

It is within these realities that Circle West Africa matriarchs have written theologies of liberation for black women from their personal and collective struggles driven by social, cultural, religious, political and economic frameworks. According to Mercy Oduyoye as quoted by Labeodan (2016), “Theologizing is seen mainly as male prerogative; hence, women for a very long time were excluded, mostly black women. Helen stated further that it was against this bedrock that Mercy Amba Oduyoye averred that women need to be visible in theology and also in religion and culture because these were areas that affected them directly.”

Helen Labeodan, a Circle West Africa matriarch, African woman and philosopher, situates her philosophical propositions and theology within these struggles of Africa Women Theologians. Her works showcase her passion for the interpretation and re-interpretation of African Philosophy, especially metaphysics and cultural beliefs from a feminist perspective. To this end, this study seeks to analyse and investigate the uniqueness of her works as an African woman and philosopher who carries the

burden of bequeathing a liberating theology. This study is therefore poised to answering the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her philosophical propositions? How did her philosophical propositions address patriarchy and wrong interpretations of African Philosophy? What could be identified as the purpose of her theology? These and other similar questions will be answered in this study with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of a West African feminist philosopher, Prof. Helen Labeodan.

## **Who is Professor Helen Adekunbi Labeodan Nee Adetunji?**

### ***Childhood, Family Background and Religion***

Helen A. Labeodan was born into the Adetunji family, a Yoruba family of six, the third of four children and the only daughter, both parents were well educated. Her mother retired as a school educator while her father retired as the secretary of Central Bank of Nigeria. She was raised in a Roman Catholic Christian home. A number of Helen's early works were published in her maiden name, Adetunji.

### ***Education***

Helen A. Labeodan attended Onward Nursery and Primary School Lagos and began her secondary school education at the Lagos Anglican Girls Grammar School but was later transferred to Ire Akari Grammar School, Isolo Lagos due to the stress of long-distance commuting which had effects on her studies when the family relocated to Ire Akari Estate. Helen was introduced to leadership positions from a young age as she was the head girl of Ire Akari Grammar school, where she completed her secondary school education. Helen went further in her education as she attended Federal Government Girls' College Sagamu for her A'Levels, where she spent a year instead of two because of her subsequent passing of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Exam (JAMB). She gained admission into the University of Ibadan to study Religious Studies, and the course was her first choice of study. Helen was attracted to Religious Studies because of how they were taught African Traditional Religion during her lower 6 Class.

Helen A. Labeodan was so thrilled during this exposure to the study of religion that she ran after the teacher and asked if this course was studied at the university. Shortly, after this time, her father told her he had purchased her JAMB form and wanted to know what course she wanted to study in the University, to which she said Religious Studies. Though her parents could not understand the motive for this choice, they were supportive because of their belief in encouraging their children's passion. This was how she found herself in Religious Studies, although according to her, at that time she did not know what she was going to do with the course. She did her mandatory one-year National Youth service at Immanuel College of Theology Samonda, Ibadan and this was where she was introduced to teaching and also the beginning of her academic career.

### ***Career***

Helen fell in love with teaching, especially seeing her students learning, understanding and articulating what they have learnt. This influenced her decision to go into academics and she made up her mind to become a lecturer during her service year. She began her career at the University of Ibadan as an Assistant lecturer and she has risen through the ranks to become a professor.

### ***Marriage, Family and Sources of Motivation***

Helen got married to her husband, Mr Olusakin Labeodan on the 26th of December, 1996. He also graduated from the University of Ibadan, he is well read and also has an M.B.A. He had his academic background in Statistics and he is successfully practicing in the field of Insurance. The happy union is blessed with three children, two girls named Romade and Romola and a boy named Romayo. The grace of God, and the support of her families; her immediate family, her husband, her parents and parents in law have been her greatest sources of motivation. Her passion has always been seeing students succeed, mentoring and follow up on students.

## **Cultural and Religious Contexts that Motivated Labeodan's Works**

Yoruba cultural beliefs play a huge role in the philosophy of Helen A. Labeodan and she proudly flaunts the Yoruba heritage in her works. In the words of Olusanya, where he opines on the uniqueness of the Yoruba race:

There is probably no other African people who have commanded as much attention of scholars of all disciplines as much as the Yorùbá. Their physical environment, history, mythology, language, artistic traditions, thought systems, social and political institutions, religion, moral and aesthetic values, economic and medical systems in Africa and other important aspects of their lives have received numerous attentions. (Odusanya 1983:26)

According to Aderibugbe (2009), the Yorùbá people are also viewed from their development as one of the most advanced communities in West Africa. The ancestry of the Yoruba is mostly traced to a common progenitor known as Oduduwa and the people predominate south western. The prominence of the Yorùbá is evident in the continent as they are one of the largest tribes in Africa. It is held that there are about thirty million Yoruba throughout the region of Africa.

A number of traditions exists that show the historical origin of the Yorùbá (Idowu, 1996:4). Although like any indigenous race, written records of the ancient past of the people are non-existent, their history have been preserved and passed down over many generations in the form of sayings, liturgies, songs, myths and philosophy. Several myths and legends credit the holy city, Ile-Ife, as the cradle of the Yorùbá from where the people dispersed to the different locations occupied now. (Adegbola, 1998). According to one of such traditions, Ile-Ife, their ancestral home was the place where God created man. There is no question about the homogeneous origin of the Yoruba as seen in the language which in spite of its many dialects provides the main evidence of a common origin and cultural heritage.

This heritage prominently features in Helen Labeodan's PhD thesis titled "Ofi and Moral Responsibility in Yoruba belief" and her subsequent works are from the background of the religion and culture of the Yoruba.



In the thesis, which was done in her maiden name, Adetunji she examines the concept of *Orí* (a complex entity interpreted sometimes as destiny) from a soft deterministic approach (Adetunji, 2001:xiv, 215). According to Helen, a person's *Orí* can be altered by societal influences such as western education, foreign religions, western culture, western medical care and changes in economic system. Intrinsic values such as good character, offering of sacrifices, hard work and ability to struggle are free actions of an individual that can affect a person's life. Helen further posited that the Yorùbá strongly believe in human destiny because success or failure of anyone largely depends on the type of choice such has made in heaven, though human efforts cannot be ruled out, even though the greater part of it can be ascribed to destiny. (Adetunji, 2001:xiv, 215).

In Labeodan (2004:18-37) she did a critical appraisal of moral responsibility and punishment in the Yoruba society. In another work, Labeodan (2006:117-134) she posited that the concept of *Orí* stands for several concepts for the Yoruba; their philosophy, religious beliefs and practices. Helen highlighted the rationale for the choice of one's *Orí* or *Iwa* and concludes that the two play major roles in moral evaluation of an individual. Labeodan (2008:60-66) underscores the fact that the concept of immortality permeates every area of life of the Yoruba. It however notes that philosophy of hereafter acts as a check and balance on the way the people live their earthly life. Labeodan (2009:111-122) explains that destiny among the Yoruba is known to be always associated with *Orí*. The main trust of this work is that it highlights the ontological status of *Orí* which is a spiritual entity. The Yoruba see *Orí* as a guardian spirit hence the need why an individual must maintain a good *Orí* at all times.

Apart from Yoruba religion and culture, Christianity has also influenced some of Labeodan's inferences. She, like many Africans is a religious person. As popularly held, it is very rare to see an African who is an atheist even though this perception appears to be changing with the rise of modernity as people are beginning to embrace skepticism, agnosticism or atheism. This trend is still in the minority because majority of African are religious people, who also believe in the existence of God. As a Christian, her religious beliefs influence some of her works and she sometimes draw her inferences from this persuasion.

In Adebo and Labeodan (2012:49-71) some Christian inferences were drawn on the problem of evil and the nature of God based on open-theism. The article submits that the problem of evil does not limit God's foreknowledge, showing the failure of open-theism to the problem of evil. Labeodan (2014:37-50) explores the effects of terrorism on Christians in Northern Nigeria. It points out the factors responsible for religious based violence in Nigeria. It shows also how safety and well-being of Christians can be enhanced through religious dialogue.

### **The Sources of Helen A. Labeodan's Philosophical Propositions**

Evidently, Helen Labeodan being a Yoruba woman, Yoruba religion and culture both play huge roles in her works. Yoruba myths, proverbs, liturgies, songs and sayings of the people contributed immensely to her works. Labeodan is not an 'arm chair researcher' because she sourced directly for data to inform her findings and conclusions. Her passion for thorough research motivated her to go to the real source of information and most her works make use of primary data gathered through interview and observation methods. Her search for knowledge did not deter her from interviewing *babalawos* (traditional Yoruba priests) and other direct sources of information for her research. While narrating her experience during her PhD interview with me, Helen expressed her experience with a particular *babalawo*, who put an object on her forehead for a few seconds and told her, 'I can see that you are ready for knowledge'. This unabashed passion for knowledge and excellence is rare.

In Labeodan (2015:21-34) Yoruba proverbs form a huge source for her findings. Here, she examined gendered proverbs and the negative perspectives about women in terms of capacity, agency, and their trustworthiness. The focus of this work is reimagining African Womanhood via Yoruba proverbs. She also brought to the fore the fact that, Yoruba proverbs affirm the equality of men and women and also attests to the possibility of social and cultural reorientation and reimagining the status of the Yoruba woman through emphasis on empowering proverbs and doing away with the disempowering ones.

Another major source of her finding and the framework for some of her research is the practice of the Yoruba and use of personal stories. Yoruba practices are innumerable, some of her works are situated within cultural practices which are often times generally known. In some cases, she recounts some real-life experiences of women to inform her philosophical propositions. Such personal stories are powerful sources that people can readily relate to. Labeodan (2002:68-78) includes the stories of some women who experienced some appalling cultural practices in the name of widowhood rites. Helen cited, the story of a woman named Alero, a programmer in Lagos Nigeria, who upon the death of her husband was accused of his death and made to go through hell in the name of widowhood rites. She was kept in a hut for seven days, fed in broken plates, raped and thrown into a river to prove her innocence in the death of her husband. She survived it all but no doubt was plagued with this trauma for a long time. This approach is a powerful way of passing a message across because experiences of real-life people are involved.

Labeodan also makes use of classical philosophies by sometimes situating them within African worldviews especially Yoruba philosophy or engaging them on their own. In Labeodan (2008:47-57) she engaged St. Thomas Aquinas' mind and matter problem by averring that a person's mind and body influence one another. Her conclusion in this work calls for a good understanding of this truth of the relationship between the physical and non-physical parts of a human being for a better understanding of interpersonal relationship in human society.

The Ifa literary corpus forms a formidable source of information in her works. Her work Labeodan (2006:117-134) is rich in cultural songs, saying, stories and several verses of Odu- Ifa. She made use of some popular Odu Ifa such as Odu Ifa Ofun to explain the concept of *Ori* in her explanation of human destiny among the Yoruba. She also employed the Odu-Obara Oyeku to narrate the story of a man who wanted to climb a coco- nut tree to the top, but was misled by pride, though destined to accomplish this feat, he did not yield to the warning of caution and while jumping from one tree to another, fell and died. This was used to teach the virtue of *suuru* (patience) and the relationship between *Ori*-destiny and *Iwa*-character.

Written records are also important sources for Labeodan's works especially in studies that focus on non-cultural matters of great importance such as those related to HIV and AIDS. She engages written records such as published reports, records, contemporary newspapers, magazines and journals related to her particular object of study. Written records play a huge role in Labeodan (2005:28-36) and Labeodan (2009:111-122) among other works.

Notably, her works also ride on the shoulders of other great women like M. Oduyoye, M.J. Masenya, M.R.A. Kanyoro, M.W. Dube, B.M. Monoham, P.N. Mwaura, D. Akintunde, B. Awe and a host of others as the convictions of these matriarchs have also influenced her thoughts. She makes references to these giants in her research as she refers to their written works and sometimes also her personal discussions with some of them.

### **Philosophical Propositions of Helen A. Labeodan which Addressed Patriarchy and Wrong Interpretations of African Philosophy**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Helen A. Labeodan is an African woman and philosopher who carries the burden of bequeathing a liberating theology to the core and this passion is very obvious in her works. To this end, most of her works show her quest for the liberation of the black woman. Labeodan (2002:68-78) "Beyond Critique: A Philosophical Appraisal of Some Cultural Practices" is a masterpiece in addressing patriarchy. This work also showcases her quest for the liberation of the black woman in the area of some cultural practices such as female gender mutilation and harmful widowhood rites, to achieve this, she made three succinct points:

- Attitudes towards women need changing which is not by the passing of legislation by law makers but its forceful implementation;
- and Constructive leadership determined to improve women lot and self-esteem;
- and the problem of ignorance of women who are brainwashed by custom.

Thankfully, the rate of female gender mutilation is reducing, whereas the practice of harmful widowhood rites is not. According to Labeodan, female gender mutilation is part of the rites of passage and it was also done due to the belief that female circumcision will reduce promiscuity. These bases are most times counter-productive because once sexual parts that give pleasure have been removed, the lady will become promiscuous in the search for sexual satisfaction, thereby jettisoning the logic for the practice. In Adetunji (2001:103-112), Labeodan was emphatic in articulating her anger and displeasure towards oppression of women by cultural beliefs and practices, her words are as follows: “The African woman has to discard the negative beliefs about life and about herself which she has been made to live with. For instance, she has been made to channel her thinking, her attitude, her habits and activities towards preparing herself for a man”. (Adetunji, 2001:103)

Helen Labeodan also addressed patriarchy and wrong interpretation of African philosophy by doing a historical comparison of eras and highlighting the basis for wrong juxtaposing of cultures or cultural hegemony. According to her, in pre-colonial African societies, women were powerful and played active roles in governance and other spheres of life, they were not seen as the weaker sex, neither were they being hostile to. (Adetunji, 2001) She mentioned great African women like Iyalode Efunsetan, Omu Okwei, other great historic African women and the roles women played in the famous Aba riot to make her point.

This positive experience of women was disrupted by the arrival of the colonial masters, who came from a patriarchal society that paid little attention to women and believed them to be suitable at best for the support of male roles. Their women were seen but not heard, this was not found in Yoruba culture and unfortunately this foreign culture infiltrated the worldviews of the people. Obviously, it cannot be asserted that precolonial Africa was totally free from patriarchy, but women still had a voice especially in matriarchal set up. They were allowed room to contribute their quota in governance, economy, religion, politics and other spheres before they were stripped of this opportunity in the wake of colonialism.

In order to propound ways forward for the African woman liberation, Helen identified the following points, which are powerful tools in the hands of women:

that there is need for a change of mindset and thinking, because most women do not have self-worth and esteem. Not only that, there is fear of abandonment, because women are not raised to believe that they can take care of themselves, which is why most women stay in terrible marriages and relationships. Helen says:

Many women get hung up on the question: how can I fulfill myself without a man or without a child? This can be frightening thought for many women. There is need to acknowledge our fears and walk through them like the woman with the issue of blood. Luke 8:43. We should be determined like this woman and take our rightful place in the society. (Adetunji, 2001:107)

Since culture has been an effective weapon of patriarchy and subjugation of women, Labeodan approached culture from a critical point of view (Adetunji, 2001:103-112). Women have been perpetually kept in bondage from cradle, that is, from the home, the area of education, public treatment, in religious spaces and to virtually all areas of living. The excuse, is usually, this is how it is done and women are expected to be treated in a certain way, made to occupy certain positions or not to. Labeodan held assertively that the African woman should develop her own philosophy of life (2001:103-112). The use of singular pronoun “her” here is brilliant and very pungent because human beings are peculiar and our stories differ, our strengths and weaknesses are not the same. What works for Angela may not work for Elizabeth. Each woman should develop her own philosophy of life. Helen submitted further that after adopting the personal philosophy of life, certain actions must follow, thus, she unfolds her liberating theology as follows: that belief systems embraced from childhood that have enslaved women should be discarded, women should support other fellow women, and women should ensure that they raise their sons well that they should respect one another irrespective of gender since a mother has a lot of influence on a child more than anyone else, female children should not be raised as inferior to boys in households, rather they should be raised to understand that they have dignity and worth as people created in the image of God. Also, girls should be taught

to speak up whenever they are abused regardless of the status of the offender and that women must refuse to be silent over any form of sexual harassment. (Adetunji, 2001)

Labeodan's position on patriarchy is very apparent in her works, her passion is contagious and her anger on the unfair treatment of women is palpable from her words. Identifying the main purpose of her theology is necessary in order to appreciate her contributions to scholarship as an African woman philosopher.

### **Purpose of Labeodan's Theology**

A hasty study of Labeodan's works may reveal several interests and wrong conclusion that her research interests revolve only around philosophy, gender, Yoruba culture and belief systems, HIV/AIDS and other similar themes. This hasty conclusion is driven by the expectations from her position as a Professor of Philosophy of Religion, pedigree, education and other factors expected to have influenced her worldviews. This is only a tiny and somewhat incomplete analysis of the purpose of her works and her research interests. A closer scrutiny of her works show that she is driven by a passion to interpret and re-interpret African Philosophy and cultural beliefs through feminist lens. That is, she has engaged African philosophy and cultural beliefs from the feminine perspective. This is different from the masculine-coloured philosophy or the Western influenced idea of feminism. Her works show her interests in issues that agitate the mind of the person, which hitherto are seen as mysteries beyond human comprehension such as, *Iwa* (character), womanhood, inner being, mind, matter and altruism. Contrary to the erroneous belief that Africans do not have a philosophy of religion her publications have revealed that fertile topics worthy of philosophical discourse are enshrined in African thought system.

Another main purpose of most of her works is to help the African woman develop her inner self worth and self-esteem. In Adetunji (2001:103-112), Labeodan asserted that her research is aimed at offering encouragement to the African woman on how she can improve her lot by looking at herself as an individual and not in relationship to a man. She held further in her bid to re-orientate African women that everywoman

should be financially independent. This is very necessary as many women live miserable lives because they cannot take care of themselves and their children, especially at the death of their husbands or the basis for remaining in abusive marriages.

On the issue of submission, Labeodan in Adetunji (2001:103-112) held that women should re-identify themselves and get out of all aspects of culture and religion which continue to hold women down. It is important for women to let go of the attitude of being dependent which is as a result of fear, women should let go of this attitude. Women should also identify and belong to support groups which could be a casual get-together of friends.

Another key purpose of her research is situating a global problem such as HIV/AIDS and terrorism within socio-cultural context, especially their impacts on women. Labeodan (2005:23-36) focuses on cultural practices such as polygamy and female circumcision that put people, especially women at the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Similarly, in Labeodan (2009:131-143) her focus is the role of the church, specifically the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) in prevention and management of HIV and AIDS and problem of stigmatisation associated with it through holistic teaching of sex ethics accompanied with humanitarian services to people living with HIV and AIDS most especially within the Church. Labeodan (2015:349-360) advocates coordinated political intervention to confront issues such as the girls' kidnapping and creating a safe space for the girl child.

## CONCLUSION

Prof. Helen Adekunbi Labeodan nee Adetunji is a quintessential scholar and her personal convictions drive her research. As a philosopher, she has a critical mind, this makes her work question some ideas that we live by, especially those that concern women. She believes that culture can be challenged and the fact that cultural practices have been done from one generation to another does not mean they cannot be queried. Her philosophy of religion shows that rational investigations of religious traditions could be engaged to address issues that affect the everyday living of human beings. This engagement is evident in several of her works.



Helen Labeodan is a matriarch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Her contributions to the vision of circle is prodigious making her worthy of emulation. She is truly concerned that theologizing is not solely a masculine affair neither should religion nor culture be used as tools for oppressing women. She believes that culture is dynamic, thus it should not be approached with a static or lethargic mindset. Her engagement of African world views and philosophy accentuate her inclination for their interpretations and re-interpretations since cultural experiences undergo a continuous process of change. Contrary to erroneous beliefs, Africans do have philosophy of religion, otherwise there will not have been a basis for her works.

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## SECTION TWO

# Biblical Hermeneutics of Matriarchs



## 6 | TO CAST FIRE UPON THE EARTH (LUKE 12:8-12): AN APPRAISAL OF TERESA OKURE'S BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN A NIGERIAN CONTEXT

*Caroline N. Mbonu*

### **Abstract**

Theological discourse in Africa has been less than liberating for women because of its transient attention to feminine sensibilities. Indeed, the paucity of African women's voices in theological debate exasperates the situation. But a hand full of African women theologians continue to interrogate the abnormality by proposing theologies that embrace all of life, those of women and men alike. This essay, which celebrates the theological thoughts of a West African woman theologian, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ, represents one such remedial approach. The paper discusses the theological contributions of this West African theology matriarch in the light of her hermeneutics grounded in a contextual approach to biblical studies. Teresa's work exposes strong theological ideas women bring to the praxis of theology, particularly in Africa. Her brilliant contributions to theology in West Africa through the contextual and feminist rendering of the biblical text offer an interpretative framework for reading and re-reading the Bible amidst the voices that shut off the marginated and tend to empty Scripture of its redemptive character. This essay explores the cultural and religious context that motivated Teresa's work, and her adept knowledge of Scripture, sources which enriched the quality of her interrogating a variety of life-giving and life-denying circumstances in the Nigerian context, primarily for the purpose of the abundant life for all (John 10:10). Teresa's hermeneutical approach questions and reassesses received androcentric interpretations, with leanings which leaves little room for women's appropriation of the full import of the Word Incarnate. Teresa Okure's hermeneutic of life which echoes inclusiveness, in a special manner contributes to the quest for renewal of life in Africa and the World Church beleaguered with gender disparity.

**Keywords:** Teresa Okure, Feminist Theologian, Hermeneutic of life, contextual, abundant

## 1. Introduction

An Appraisal of the biblical Hermeneutics of Teresa Okure is akin to evaluating what the Igbo call *nnukwu nmanwu*, (literally, *nnukwu* = very big; *nmanwu* = masquerade) meaning a pre-eminent masquerade. Mbonu (2010a) contends that one cannot take in the full significance of such a prominent masquerade from a single angle of vision but must find a creative way to have a 360-degree view of the phenomenon in order to appreciate its full import. Hence, the essay on Teresa Okure is only an attempt at an appraisal of this Nigerian-born genius of theology. The African cultural text, infused with the Holy Spirit (Fire, wind, water), provides the flora and fauna with which Teresa weaves her theological tapestry. Text employed here includes but is not limited to symbols, rituals, practices and customs, myths, documents, structures of power, kinship, and social set-ups. With such a rich resource, Teresa can interrogate a variety of life-giving and life-denying situations in the Nigerian religious context. Although many contemporary Nigerian Christian claims to be on fire with the Word of God there remains much to be desired to make the Word alive and active (Heb. 4:12) in relation to religion on the ground. Making the word alive and active in the African cultural context is at the heart of Teresa Okure's hermeneutics (Okure, 2000). Undoubtedly, the indigenous context remains the source of cultural value and meaning, which Teresa so well explores in most of her works. In her theologising, Teresa takes seriously the Pontifical Biblical Commission challenge (Béchar, 2001) to women biblical scholars to put new questions to the biblical text which in turn occasions new discoveries. Her findings show how Scripture speaks to, and about women's contributions in building up the body of Christ—the church, both locally and globally, thus she frequently contributes new and penetrating insights to the interpretation of Scripture and rediscovers features that had been overlooked as in the case of Lydia in Luke-Acts 16, the women of Samaria (John 4: 1-26) among other texts.

To elucidate some of Teresa's contributions up to this point, this study is poised to answer the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her hermeneutical approaches? How did her theological propositions address gender discrimination? What

could be identified as the purpose of her theology? How can her hermeneutics contribute to the world Church? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding the redemptive character of the work of a West African Feminist/womanist theologian, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ.

The rest of the chapter is laid out in six sections beginning with a brief biography of Sister Teresa Okure, then follows the contexts that inspired her works, her theological propositions, and the gender conundrum in theology. The main purpose of her theology and hermeneutical contribution to the world church. Worthy of note is the use of the first name in this study. Because this essay celebrates a matriarch, a woman theologian, and her special theological contributions, I employ her first name, Teresa, rather than the last name, Okure, in the discussion.

## **2. Brief Biography of Sister Professor Teresa Okure**

Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ, a native of Anua Offot, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, is a Roman Catholic Religious Sister and Professor of New Testament and Gender Hermeneutics. She is the first African member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ). Sister Teresa made a profession of religious vows (Poverty, Chastity, Obedience), in England in 1965, over five decades ago. She earned her doctoral degree at Fordham University; her doctoral thesis was titled: *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Okure, 1988).

A renowned theologian, teacher, writer, and public speaker, Sister Teresa Okure is the First Scholar-in-Residence at the Catholic Institute of West Africa where she taught for more than thirty-five years and served in various leadership roles at the Institute, including the Academic Dean of Faculty, Dean of Students Affairs, and Head of the Department of Biblical Studies. She is a member of many national and international theological, missiological, and biblical associations. Sister Teresa is the founding president and current president of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria and a foundation member of the Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE). A well-known biblical scholar, Sister Teresa has lectured widely on five continents. A contextual theologian deeply rooted in culture, Sister advocates holding in tandem theology and one's

cultural realities for a more holistic living. These thoughts suffuse most of her literary works.

Sister Teresa Okure's literary works are voluminous. She is co-editor of the biblical commentary series *Texts and Context* and *Global Bible Commentary*. She has authored, co-authored, edited, and co-edited several works including commentaries, church documents, and academic theses. Her latest WorldCat Identities include Works: 29 works in 61 publications in 7 languages and 1,295 library holdings. A more comprehensive listing of her works can be accessed through her Google profile: Teresa Okure and Sr. Teresa Okure.

Sister Teresa's congenial disposition attracts her fond nicknames. She is known among her Sisters (SHCJ), associates, and colleagues as Aunty/Auntie. Her SHCJ religious Sisters nicknamed her "John 10:10" on account of her frequent reference to the passage, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly," the *raison d'être* of the Incarnation. The Johannine text is foundational to her numerous reflections, presentations, and writings. Teresa's deeply rooted Catholic family parentage, upbringing, and abiding identity greatly impact her profound theological endeavours. Her background exposes the rich cultural and religious contexts that motivated the numerous insightful theological works of this erudite matriarch, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, SHCJ.

### **3. Cultural and Religious Contexts that Motivated Her Works**

Like a typical African youngster, whose upbringing is the product of the entire village community, Teresa draws from the experience of her culture-centered nurturing, having drunk deeply from the well of her ancestors. Her reflections on the Bible and theology bear the mark of these multiple influences—familial, cultural, social, and religious. Her rich familial context predisposed her call to respond to the call to the vowed religious life early in life as well as to theological studies. Teresa's Ibibio culture provided the flora and fauna to embrace a programme of life, grounded in the text of John 10:10. Thus, she theologizes with the authority of experience.

For a long time, theological discourse, particularly in Africa, was considered an exclusive preserve of men. Women were excluded from theological studies but indoctrinated or encouraged to pursue service-oriented disciplines. As a result of the absence of a feminine voice in theological discourse, biblical interpretations became ponderously androcentric. Such interpretations became normative for relationships both in the life of the individual, church life, and civil society. Women were subjected to appropriate androcentric rendering as the “word of God” regardless of the impact on their lives. Undoubtedly, the outcome of such appropriation sustained women’s discrimination. This way of doing theology equally fueled underdevelopment and as well exacerbated the gender conundrum, a factor that one can surmise as motivating Teresa’s interest in gender hermeneutics. Indeed, the doyen of African women theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Oduyoye, 2004), decries the subordination and marginalization of women inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Teresa’s experience of life as a woman and as a woman of faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition provides a robust background to respond theologically to discrimination within the Church-cultural context. Moreover, her work and those of other women theologians help to assuage the overdependence on men theologians for women’s theological reflections, thereby fostering feminine sensitivity. Béchard (2001) puts it thus, “feminine sensitivity which helps to unmask and correct commonly accepted interpretations that were tendentious and sought to justify the male domination of women.” The foregoing section offers but a partial characteristic that shaped the preeminent theological masquerade that Teresa’s hermeneutics and theologizing have evolved. We now turn to her theological propositions.

#### **4. The Sources of Teresa’s Findings Leading to her Theological Propositions**

In her theologizing, Teresa responds to many unanswered questions as it pertains to women in the community called Church. With a focus on biblical women characters, Teresa extends the frontiers of theological discourse to include those who received biblical interpretations placed almost permanently on the margin of society, the women. Teresa’s (Okure,



2009) insightful hermeneutics on biblical women's characters represent the central piece of her witnessing God's good news to the poor as represented in her work on the Woman of Samaria and other such biblical characters. The poor includes not only women but in actuality and metaphorically, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed as well. For Teresa (Okure, 2000) ardent faith means a life-centered understanding of the Word of God that has come down to us through the sacred text, the Bible. So, to bring the good news to the marginated consists of doing what the Word said and not merely hearing it (cf. James 1:22), and that is so because the word is not moribund; it is alive and active.

Teresa remains actively engaged in bringing to life the mission of the word to life. She maintains (Okure, 2000) that since life was the warp and weft of what became the Bible, the experience of life remains the hermeneutical key to reading the sacred text. Such reading enables the reader to discover what the text means for our present context. Teresa (Okure, 2000) puts it thus, "events recorded in the Bible happened in life first or were lived before they were recorded in the Bible as a Book," an allusion that the Bible is a product of humankind culture. In this regard, Teresa (Okure, 2000) found out that the authors of the New Testament took their faith and life concerns to the story of Jesus just as the authors of the Hebrew Bible took theirs to the Torah traditions. She argues that if that is the case, readers make a commitment to bring their life's questions and experiences into the study and rendering of the Bible (Okure, 2000). It is through the prism of contextual reading that we can listen to and hear the biblical message for our life's context as individuals and as a community in the present. Thus, her hermeneutics of faith aims at restoring meaning to the text. Because the Bible is not to be read anachronistically, being alive and active abundantly suggests that one cannot expect the biblical authors to answer the life questions of our time and place.

According to Teresa (Okure, 2002), our life experience is the tinder, twig, and log that enkindles the fire embedded in the Bible, that fire cast upon the earth that engulfs all that is on its path. She totally embraces the mandate of *Dei Verbum* (Béchar, 2001) in grounding her theological reflections in African sensibilities; *Dei Verbum* supports the idea of contextual the reading of text in the sense that the Word (a seed), extracts from the earth (the context) in which it is planted the elements that are

useful for its growth and fruitfulness (Béchar, 2001). It is this cultural reality that will provide the soil for the appropriation of the Word of God as it comes across in the works of our matriarch, Sister Teresa Okure. Outside this reality according to Mbonu (2001), the Gospel will continue to be a stranger in Africa; a stranger who must someday depart (Mbonu, 2011). Teresa (Okure, 2000) sees this mission of enkindling the light of the Gospel on the African continent as embodying the hope that readers of the Bible would be mindful of Jesus' concern that the whole earth should catch this fire; the fire of love, the Holy Spirit who renews the face of the earth, ushering in a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a celebration of oneness in Christ.

## **5. Specific Areas where her Hermeneutical Propositions have addressed Patriarchy**

Teresa's lived experience as a baptized African woman, permeates her approach to the biblical text. For her (Okure, 2021), Paul's insistence on the equal dignity of man and women in Christ (Gal 3:28) through baptism challenges androcentrism among believers in the Word Incarnate. The Galatian text harkens back to Genesis 1:27, 5:2 – male and female he created them (Okure, 2021), and failure to appropriate this new identity makes one an inauthentic human being. Inauthenticity is suggestive of rejection or denial of a person's God-human character, that is, being created in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:27). In arguing for inclusiveness, Teresa (Okure, 2000) insists that Jesus' by his broken body on the cross, destroyed all the barriers separating peoples (Eph 2:16) and in so doing, gathered automatically into one, all God's children scattered by the endemic of sins of racism, sexism, patriarchy, greed, lust for power and prestige. In other words, the impervious gender conundrum hinges on this lack of faith in God's image and likeness in all of humanity. And again, where every adherent of the biblical faith tradition believes in a common humanity of God's people, all barriers of gender, ethnocentrism, and social stratification would break down. The collapse of division among God's children because of our common faith in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5:14-16), is a theological position that upholds the dignity of all, women as well as men.

One of the earliest African women theologians, Teresa, joins her peers to universalize theology by gently unmasking its feminine face, which androcentrism seems to have eclipsed in the theological discourse. Because theology is often voiced through a male perspective, received theological rendition has not been without bias, favouring masculinity, depriving women and indeed all of Christ's faithful, women and men alike, of the fullness of theological reflections. This idea comes across well in Teresa's doctoral thesis titled: "The Johannine approach to mission: a contextual study of John 4:1-42", a grounded holistic theological discourse. Her work highlights her perceptive hermeneutical study of women and inclusive mission theology. This groundbreaking study featuring an ordinary village woman of Sychar in Samaria stamps Teresa's advocacy for inclusiveness. Teresa's study of the woman of Samaria reverberates with imageries of the aliveness of the word on fire enlightening all around it, a perfect example of the mission.

Curiously, the author of the Gospel according to John sought out an ideal environment to launch Jesus' mission outside his Jewish territory. The writer chooses a watering place, a well, a motive common to both Jews and Samaritans alike. A well occupies a significant place in the land of the Bible and is seen as a domain of women. During this epoch, young women typically had the daily chore of drawing water from wells to supply the family household or water the family livestock. (Gen 16:6-14), (Gen 21:19), Genesis 24:15; Gen 29:1-11, (Exod. 2:15-22). Note also in the Song of Songs, the woman is praised as a "garden fountain, a well of living water" (4:15). In many contemporary African villages as in ancient Israel, fetching water at the well for the use of the household is and was a true women's routine. The import of a watering place and the role women play in this life-giving domain was not lost on the Johannine Jesus. Scripture has it that at the point of meeting with the woman, Jesus was already "tired out by the journey" and sat at Jacob's well (John 4:6), to refresh. It was not strange that the central point of the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well was about water, a life-giving element.

At the end of the fortuitous encounter with Jesus, the unnamed woman of Samaritan emerges as a missionary. She is not unlike another Bible character, Mary of Magdala, whose similar encounter with Jesus

confirms her as a missionary to announce the Resurrection to the disciples and to the entire world (John 20:17-18). Tellingly, while Jesus was preparing a Sychar village woman to become his mission torch bearer to a Samaritan audience, His [*chosen male*] disciples (John 1:35-51) were in the city foraging for food, “had gone to the city to buy food” (John 4:8). It is no coincidence that as water is life-giving and symbolizes creation and new beginnings in Scripture, Teresa (Okure, 2009) notes that God would choose water sources as places for revelation, as well as food (John 6:56), indispensable elements for life; concerns of the Samaritan woman and the hungry disciples respectively, become fundamental symbols of Jesus’ life-giving mission.

Furthermore, Teresa (Okure, 2009) reads the life-giving encounter of Jesus and the woman at the well in light of the social ills afflicting women in contemporary African society. She first highlights the rejection, prejudice, and isolation of the two main characters, Jesus and the woman, in their own contexts, and their contribution to John’s account of how the woman leads her village to the “living water” of faith in Jesus. Teresa posits that Jesus’ visit with the woman of Samaria calls African women to recognize and claim the Christological grounds for their right to participate along with men in all aspects of society and church life. On a broader scale, contemporary African women’s encounter with Jesus would no doubt challenge the male clerical church to be open to and let go according to Teresa (Okure, 2009) of their scandal at “what Jesus wants with women.” What Jesus wants with women is not different from that which he is desirous of from men, that is, to further the reign of God, in their life context within their communities and beyond.

Teresa (Okure, 2000) underscores life as the primary locus of God-human encounter. In emphasizing life as the principal point of entry and context of doing theology, women theologians add a dimension missing or at least not obvious among Third World male theologians, namely the need to begin with the theologian’s life experience. For Teresa (Okure, 2000), “this emphasis is not just a passing fad; she perceives life as “the *terminus a quo* and *ad quem* of doing theology and interpreting scripture, otherwise, we may be dead researchers claiming to be alive.” As bearers of life, therefore, women’s theological inquiries that do not privilege life’s

experience cannot be liberative. I employ the term liberative to include actions that unburden, lift or promote the humanity of persons, individually or collectively, as exemplified in the narrative of the case of Lydia in Luke-Acts, 16:11-15; 40.

Teresa's (Okure, 2017) work has moved forward the conversation on women's role in Scripture and its appropriation in the world Church. Her article, "the challenge of Lydia's leadership (Acts 16:11-15) for the Contemporary Church, is most appropriate. Where most scholars (men) stress the conventional women's role, the hospitality, of Lydia to the apostle Paul and his collaborators and downplay her leadership role, Teresa (Okure, 2017) highlights the leadership role of this first documented European convert to Christianity, Lydia of Thyatira in Philippi. After she and her household received baptism, Lydia stepped into her Christian leadership role, exhibiting the transformative power of baptism, boldly and emphatically, calling out Paul to live out the theology of oneness in Christ that baptism confers, "if you judge that I am a true believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house" (Acts 16:15). Teresa (Okure, 2017) reads Lydia's terse address to Paul as a challenge to him to live the theology of baptism personally, physically, and not just theologically or ideologically. That is to say, Paul should put his body where his theology was. And she "prevailed upon" Paul and his companions. Appropriation of Lydia's deployment of charismata remains the challenge for African Christian women struggling to birth life in a milieu of unredeemed patriarchy.

Moreover, she contends that the attitude of the hierarchical church, which continues to legislate for the exclusion and silencing of women or gives them only token considerations is anti-gospel and anti-*Christos*. If the church in Africa today wants to participate in what God wants with women for the redemption and transformation of the continent, both genders will need to revisit long-held derogatory attitudes toward women and learn to celebrate the gifts that God gives to them for their good as persons, and for the good of all. God's gift of the Holy Spirit to a woman, Mary in the gospel of Luke (1:35) is expressed in prophecy (Luke 1:40), which another woman, Elizabeth equally shares (Luke 1:41). Raymond Brown (1990) notes that the Lukan Mary was "the first disciple to meet Jesus' standard of hearing the word of God and doing it." Mbonu (2010)

bemoans the fact that the role of Mary of Nazareth as a woman, who hears God's word and does it, eludes the generous comment of most biblical scholars, depriving Christian women of a model of gospel discipleship. Because biblical interpretation represents not just religious discourse for and among Christians, meanings derived from biblical interpretations also can influence public and political discourse, thus Teresa keeps exploring new grounds from the New Testament perspective that valorizes women as in the case of Lydia and the unnamed woman of Samaria discussed above.

## 6. Main Purpose of her Theology

The focal point of Teresa's theology is abundant or fullness of life (John 10:10). The thought of living life to its fullest is evident in her numerous writings and presentations. Little wonder her SHCJ Community Sisters nicknamed her "John 10:10". The Fullness of life is a concept replete in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The prophet Micah, for example, articulates the abundance of life as a people enjoying God's love, sitting under their own vines and under their own fig trees (4:4). And the Johannine Jesus images such abundance in the teaching of himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), who not only shows that in his unconditional concern for the sheep but also in his willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. A key to appreciating the teaching of the Good Shepherd is found in the preceding chapter, chapter 9, where the establishment (Pharisees) fiercely opposed Jesus' association with the poor, represented in the man born blind. Here, sightlessness, be it spiritual or physical, is seen as militating against the fullness of life in its totality. But Jesus, whose liberative agenda is assumed by Teresa's quest in engaging the Bible, urges the contemporary reader to show the same passion for the poor. The fullness of life heralded by good news to the poor remains the *raison d'être* of the Incarnation, which is the heart of theology. To this end, rendering the gospel of abundant life which is consistent with Jesus' mission (Luke 4:18-19; 19:10; John 6:51), becomes Teresa's theological passion.

## 7. Teresa's Hermeneutics Contribution to the World Church

According to Teresa (Okure, 2000), concern for life is the primary hermeneutical key and context for reading the Bible. This assertion is perhaps her greatest contribution yet, to the world Church. Life for her comprises physical, spiritual, cultural, and psychological. Life remains the locus of the God-humankind encounter and one cannot meaningfully engage the Bible outside of life's experiences. Engaging the biblical text with a grounding in concern for life enables the reader to discover hitherto unexpected and enriching meanings, which received interpretations seem unable to unveil. The significance of beginning the reading of the Bible from life's experience cannot be overlooked because as Teresa (Okure, 2000) argues life is a starting point and abiding context of hermeneutics, life is a reality that imposes itself. Consequently, reading the Bible is not the preserve of students of the Bible, the sacred text is the Church's book and thus within the reach of every Christian. But Teresa is not unaware of the struggle that comes with the contextual reading of the biblical text.

She describes the challenge as striking the match more than once for the fire to ignite (Okure, 2000). Here, she identifies inherited prejudices based on sex, race, class, and fear of being ridiculed by scholars who still believe in doing "a purely objective and scientific" theology and biblical study. Whereas there is no such thing as a purely objective and scientific theology and biblical study. All of the theology including Scripture itself is wholly about meaning, hence, it is entirely about interpretations and historico-contextual constructions. And every interpretation emerges out of a "standpoint," a perspective. Even the so-called scientific study is always rooted in a certain intellectual or theoretical tradition.

Androcentric and patriarchal standpoints have dominated theological and biblical reflections for far too long and thus tend to enjoy the appearance of a natural, normative, objective, and taken-for-granted phenomenon. In reality, there is nothing natural or normal, or even objective about them. They are simply what they are, male perspectives. It is high time that women's standpoints from their particular lived experiences were allowed to speak for themselves, that women were allowed to represent themselves in shaping their own narratives, and herstories (not histories), and that they are granted visibility in the theological hermeneutical

landscape. Herein lays the significance of this work on our West African matriarch, Sister Professor Teresa Okure, whose doggedness in valorizing women's biblical characters ushers a new dawn, a renewal, in the African religious sphere.

## CONCLUSION

This study is but the tip of the iceberg of what represents Teresa's theology and hermeneutics. Fundamentally she applies a wide range of hermeneutical tools in reflecting God-presence among us. Her numerous works provide insights into seeking biblical truths in the readers' context for a more effective engagement with the church and society. In particular, Teresa challenges readers of the Bible to do so with more openness, listening to what God says to the individual and to the community. She aligns her voice with that of other African women theologians to uncover, recover, and make contemporaneous contributions of biblical African matriarchs whose dynamism enlivens the People of God all in an effort to nourish God's children in the contemporary African Christian milieu. Our West African matriarch, Teresa, calls on African women believers to rise up and bridge the gap both in the theological space and leadership space in church and society. In so doing, she passionately argues for collaboration in the mission of Christ devoid of gender superiority and seeks to heal the unredeemed patriarchal culture that militates against human flourishing and fullness of life for women and men as well, on the continent and elsewhere.

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## 7 | **THESE BONES CAN RISE:** BEA AKOTO'S AFRICAN FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION

*Agnes Ifeyinwa Acha*

### **Abstract**

“These bones can rise” is the response of Reverend Dr. Dorothy BEA Akoto to the question “can these bones rise?” which was posed in Ezekiel 37:3. Her article “Can these bones rise? Re-reading Ezekiel 37:1-14 in the HIV/AIDS Context” clearly reflects her contextual feminist and liberation theology. Her research in Gender studies in the Bible relate to marriage, ministerial education, missions, poverty, rights/health of women and children, issues of masculinity, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, issues of race, class and what promotes justice and equity and reveals God’s dignity in everyone created in God’s image regardless of their sexual orientation. This study analyzes and investigates the uniqueness of the works of Dorothy, BEA Akoto as an African woman and Biblical theologian who seeks to leave a legacy of theology of liberation.

**Keywords:** Dorothy BEA Akoto-Abutiate, Dry Bones, Ezekiel, Decolonization, Gender Studies, African, Liberation Theology, Contextualized Biblical Interpretation

### **Introduction**

Professor Dorothy BEA Akoto is an African Biblical theologian who engages in theology of liberation, gender studies, contextual and in-culturation theology. The work of feminists (and that of liberation theologians at large), analyzing both scripture and culture, has resulted in uncovering structures of oppression and discrimination within church and society and has resulted into the world-wide demand of women for wholeness and liberation. This quest for wholeness and full humanity also occurs in African women’s theology and has led to an African feminist liberation

theology (Frederiks, 2003:68). The fact that feminism developed in the religious and the secular sphere has also helped women in their political, economic and social struggle for liberation (Frederiks, 2003:68). Dube observes that, “liberation theology rose from a context of resisting both imperial oppression and deformation of people through exploitation, racism, and dispossession” (Dube, 2004:291). This study aims at discovering the liberation theology of an African Biblical theologian.

This paper attempts to understand the political, cultural, social and religious contexts that inspired her works. It also seeks to discover the sources of her findings which led to her theological propositions. The work also surveys how her contextual biblical interpretations, gender and liberation theological propositions address patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, sexual and disability-based discrimination. This is achieved in five sub-sections. The first sub-section is a brief introduction to the work. This is followed by a short write-up on Professor Dorothy BEA Akoto. The third sub-section explores the political, cultural, sociological and religious contexts that inspired her works. Specific areas where her contextual biblical interpretation, gender and liberation theological propositions address are patriarchy, colonialism and disability-based discrimination. These are surveyed in the fourth sub-section. The fifth sub-section focuses on the possible application of Akoto’s hermeneutics to future world and work.

### **A Short Write-up on Professor Dorothy BEA Akoto**

Rev. Professor Dorothy BEA Akoto is a native of Avatime Biakpa and An-yako-Asadame in Volta Region Ghana. She was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1957. She is the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 7 children of her parents. Unfortunately, she lost her mother at the age of 9. She attended the following schools: Evangelical Presbyterian Basic School, Avatime, Biakpa; John F. Kennedy Memorial Preparatory School; Saint John’s Preparatory School, Nswam Road Accra. For her secondary education, she attended Mawuli School, Ho Volta Region. She obtained her first degree at Cape Coast University Institute of Education, ATTIC, Winneba. She worked with Volta Regional Administration as an Executive Officer and also as a Telephonist. She

also worked with Ghana Education Service (GES), teaching English Language and Literature in various schools and Colleges. Dorothy BEA Akoto served as a National in-service Trainer of Teachers of Primary, Middle, Junior secondary schools and Colleges on the preparation and appropriate use of Teaching/Learning Aids.

She holds a degree in Master of Divinity (MDiv), Master of Arts in Christian Education (MACE), Master of Theology (MTh), Master of Theology (MTh) from various universities in the USA. She obtained her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Hebrew Bible, Culture and Hermeneutics from Chicago Theological Seminary (C.T.S.), Chicago/IL, USA. Currently, Akoto is the Vice President of Trinity Theological Seminary (TTS), Legon, Accra, where she is a Professor of Hebrew Language, Old Testament and Gender Studies and the immediate past academic Dean. She has been an Adjunct Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Interdenominational Theological Center (I.T.C) in Atlanta/GA, USA and a visiting Lecturer at McCormick Theological Seminary (MTS), Chicago/IL, USA. She is an ordained Minister of the Word and Sacrament/Minister of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana (EPCG).

Rev. Professor Akoto has been an Executive Committee member of African Biblical Hermeneutics of SBL, West African Association of Theological Institutions Ghana, Ghana Association of Biblical Exegetes, (GHABES), *Hokma* House, *Theta Phi* International Honour Society, World Alliance of Reformed Churches and held various positions in several academic Associations. Her area of specialization and research interests borders on Wisdom Literature (especially, the Bible and African Proverbial Communication), Cultural, Postcolonial and Gender Studies. Rev. Professor Akoto is a researcher, Christian Educator, Pastoral Counselor, Preacher and Public Speaker and has presented papers, held panel discussions at many Church, Academic, Social Activism, HIV and AIDS, as well as Women's/Leadership Conferences in various parts of Africa, the USA, Middle East, Asia (Korea), the Caribbean, Rome, Corinth and other places. She is a published author of books, articles in books and academic Journals in Africa, the USA and Europe.

## Political, Cultural, Sociological and Religious Contexts that Inspired her Works

African feminists maintain that the cultural context is not neutral, but is gender biased and hence needs to be handled with care and suspicion. There is therefore the need for what Kanyoro calls “an engendered communal theology” (Fredriks, 2003:73; cf. Kanyoro, 2001:169). Most of Dorothy Akoto’s theological propositions were done in the “Circle of Concerned African Women” (henceforth Circle). The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians started in 1989 when Mercy Oduyoye called together a group of women at Trinity College in Legon, Ghana around the theme: *Talitha Cum!* Daughters of Africa arise! The theme was taken from the story of the nameless daughter of Jairus who was raised from the dead by Jesus with the words: *Talitha Cum!* (Luke 8:40ff.). Like this little girl called Miss Jairus by African women theologians, African women were challenged to get up and speak (Fredriks, 2003:70; cf. Dube, 2001:5). Akoto’s involvement with the Circle was in the mid 1990s while doing Masters degree in the USA.

A meeting and discussion with Professor Mercy Oduyoye at a Presbyterian Church, USA gathering in Louisville, Kentucky was a great motivation. Some of the issues discussed bordered on the challenges faced by women in theological education, domestic violence against women, racism, sexism and other forms of dehumanizing “isms” affecting the female species, as well as “feminine” males. Professor Mercy Oduyoye and some other “Circle sisters” encouraged them to start writing articles for Circle publications. The “Circle” writings addressed issues of injustice in society and related issues in “patriarchally”-inclined stories in the Bible.

As an African feminist and a liberation theologian, Akoto’s works started from the premise that women are regarded as lesser than men. Women are “underrated and not affirmed or offered the opportunity to affirm themselves” (Akoto, 2000:274). “Women and their works as mothers and homemakers have often been bypassed as if women did nothing beyond producing and raising offspring” (Akoto, 2000:274; quoting Oduyoye, 1995:81). Akoto observes that when s/he is not nurtured or allowed freedom of expression, the individual begins to live as a victim and experiences difficulties in resolving emotional trauma and it gradually

becomes an accumulation of unfinished psychological and emotional business leading to chronic anxiety, fear, confusion, emptiness and unhappiness. This can explain some causes of ill-health; emotional or mental, among African women who have been denied the freedom to be themselves, resulting in their ill-health. (Akoto, 2006:99-100). I agree with Okure that “the liberative elements in the Bible with respect to women stem from the divine perspective, the oppressive ones from the human perspective” (Okure, 2006:52).

Akoto conflates issues concerning women’s health with the issue of their rights and also the rights of children. Life has been terrible for children in Africa in that they have little or no security. Some of the evils that children face in Africa include: rape, famine and warfare. They also face lack of some basic human rights that UNICEF have outlined for children such as affection, love and understanding (Akoto, 2006:101), a right to food and medicine, education, play, a name and nationality, “special care if handicapped” (Akoto, 2006:101), or to be put first in times of disaster, participate in society, be raised in society in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood, and to “enjoy these rights, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national or social origin” (Akoto, 2006:101). These rights are not realized in Africa. In Zimbabwe for instance, children are “raped and tortured by Security Police and Youth Brigade members” (Akoto, 2006:101; cf. Landsberg, 2013:109-110). In some parts of Africa like Uganda, children are used as child soldiers. It is true that men do fall victims to the conditions of violence, rape, war, poverty, famine and injustice, in Africa, however, women and children are most at risk.

The missionaries enforced Christianity with other foreign cultural elements on Africans. Africans were dehumanized; their race and religion were regarded as inferior. Akoto gives an example of the Ewe people who originally worshipped their god, Mawu. (Landsberg, 2013:110-111). When the missionaries came with the Judaeo-Christian concept of God, the Ewe began to scorn their own cultures in favor of the European culture seeing their own culture as substandard. With the missionaries tagging everything African as “savage” or “devilish” (Akoto, 2000:262) even the Ewe themselves started to look down on their understanding of self. They were no longer being defined by themselves but by the missionaries and by Europe. God, divinity and culture were present in Africa before

the advent of Christianity and the work done by the missionaries and the ideas such as god, divinity and culture need to be reclaimed by people who work in favor of Africa (Landsberg, 2013:108).

Akoto wrote in the context of postcolonialism, hence she proposes a decolonial turn in African epistemological system. It was a period of the demise of colonialism through the eradication of colonial administration, giving rise to the concept of postcolonial world. According to Stuart Hall (1996:249), it is a period of shift from the age of empires to the post-independence/post-decolonization moment. However, as Hall observes, colonialism was a process which had as its “outer face” expansion, exploration, conquest, colonization, and imperial hegemonisation. The removal of the “outer face” did not amount to a completely decolonized world – the longstanding patterns and structures produced by colonialism did not magically disappear (Hall, 1996:249). Mignolo opines that “modernity”, a complex narrative originated in Europe, building Western civilization, and celebrating its achievements, while hiding its darker side, “coloniality”. Hence, coloniality is constitutive of modernity (Mignolo, 2011:2-3) therefore, decolonisation cannot be rendered as a completed project. The colonial matrix of power that privileged the Euro/Western culture, political system, economic system, knowledge and epistemological systems, while trampling over and ploughing under the non-Euro/Western systems continue to survive. This situation is one which decolonial scholars refer to as “coloniality”, which Mignolo regards as the hidden and darker side of modernity (Mignolo, 2011:2-3). Thus, coloniality is the continuing patterns and structures of domination, produced through centuries of colonialism. Hence “to be socially located in Africa does not automatically imply a position of colonial difference” (Ramantswana, 2017:352-353).

Coloniality survives colonialism which is kept alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of the self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience... (Maldonado-Torres, 2007:243). The modern/colonial world-system succeeds in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones in the dominant positions.” (Grosfoguel,

2007:213). Furthermore, “the colonial system survives even in the absence of the colonial administration because part of the strategy was to colonize the minds of the others. It relied on turning the colonized to think epistemically as the colonizers by imposing Euro/Western knowledge forms into their minds (Ramantswana, 2017:354). The colonization of the mind remains a current reality even today.... We are not yet free; we continue to live within the global structures of coloniality. Colonial systems continue to shape our traditions, religious inclinations, languages, politics, fashion, ideology, education, and so on. The colonial values, norms, and ideologies continue to subtly shape us and to some extent, have become part of our identity and being (Ramantswana, 2016:188; cf. Ramantswana, 2017:353-354).

The decolonial turn in Africa and elsewhere is not just the demise of the imperial political administration that came from foreign lands; it also challenges the body-politics in which Africans or the indigenous people in Africa and elsewhere were considered less human and so their institutions, knowledge, and knowledge systems were made inferior (Mignolo, 2009:16). The decolonial turn is a restorative process through which those who were regarded as racially inferior and dehumanized were recognized as deserving of privilege and access to opportunities and resources, people whose institutions and knowledge matter, not only to challenge white superiority but to assert their blackness (Flagg, 2005:1-11). The decolonial turn is what Cesaire (2010:147) describes as the “coming to consciousness” of the self...and are ready to assume at all levels and in all areas the responsibilities that flow from his awareness (Cesaire, 2010:147).

For Steve Biko, the “coming to consciousness” means coming into “black consciousness”. He observed that the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his misery, a slave, and an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. The first step to change is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to instill him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore, letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is an inward-looking process and the definition of “Black Consciousness” (Biko, 2004:31).



The philosophy of Black Consciousness, expresses group pride and determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. Its aim is the realization by the blacks that the mind of the oppressed is the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor. Once the oppressor is able to effectively manipulate and control the mind of the oppressed, the latter sees himself/herself as a liability to the white man and unable to resist. Hence, the Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being, entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine (Biko, 2004:74; Aime Cesaire, 2010:148). Black consciousness is the coming to the realization, that black is beautiful (Biko, 2004:115). Beauty in this sense is not just about the looks; it implies overcoming the self-negation tendency by affirming blackness and Africanness. Therefore, the decolonial turn is about making a racial or an ontological shift through the affirmation of our being; it also requires making an epistemological shift, a shift in the geography of reason (Ramantswana, 2017:355).

### **Specific Issues Dorothy Akoto addressed in her Contextual Biblical Interpretations**

Dorothy Akoto's "hermeneutic of grafting" depends on, and grows out of the other efforts by African peoples to articulate an adequate hermeneutic for the understanding of the Bible (Akoto, 2014). The hermeneutic avoids using academic jargons such as inculturation, acculturation, indigenization and others developed in West". Akoto "locates the hermeneutic of grafting within the decolonial turn, considering its tenet that regards Africa as having fully fledged knowledge systems". She highlights the "pillars of the hermeneutics of grafting" which she identifies as "an Africanizing approach". The question of how far we can go with the hermeneutic of grafting without violating the African tree of life remains. There is also the possibility of "reverse grafting", the possibility of grafting the African knowledge systems onto the Biblical "tree" (Ramantswana, 2017:352). The colonial system relied on turning the colonized to think epistemically as the colonizers by imposing Euro/Western knowledge forms into the minds of the colonized others. This was achieved through "invidious comparison" (Dascal, 2009:308-332) system of privileging of the

Euro/Western systems by regarding them as “superior” or “civilized” and regarding systems of the colonized as primitive.

According to Ramantswana (2016:188) the colonization of the mind remains a current reality that we live with and have to wrestle with.... we are not yet free; we continue to live within the global structures of coloniality. Colonial systems continue to shape our traditions, religious inclinations, languages, politics, fashion, ideology, education e.t.c. The colonial values, norms, and ideologies continue to invisibly shape us in our subaltern locations and have become part of us – identity and being. Akoto’s “hermeneutic of grafting” is located within the decolonial turn, since it makes a shift in the geography of reason by making Africa the focus and the priority in the art of Biblical interpretation, thus she brings the previously disqualified into the frame of knowledge. Again, this hermeneutic of grafting indicates a refusal to bow down to the Biblical text as the dominant other; and it is rather the Biblical other that has to submit to the African other. In our African context, being part of our interpretive communities is not something static; rather, it is to be part of interpretive communities which have to engage in a restorative process through a delinking from the shackles of colonialism and coloniality and a relinking with our African cultures, heritage, and knowledge systems. Akoto-Abutiata’s approach is a relinking strategy (Ramantswana, 2017:358).

The “hermeneutic of grafting” takes as its ideological angle or option, Africanization. In line with this approach, the book is organized around four African-Ghanaian virtues: diligence, humility, prudence, and sociability. In chapters 2 and 3, which are the core of the book, these virtues are discussed on their own without interruption, from the Biblical text. The Ghanaian folk proverbs are discussed as a fully-fledged tree. In the final chapter of the book, shoots from the Biblical tree of life are identified and grafted into the African tree of life (Ramantswana, 2017:360). In the hermeneutic of grafting, the Biblical proverbs that are identified as shoots worthy to be taken over and grafted into the African tree of life are those that share the agricultural setting; comment on similar situations; have similar or identical wording with those in the African context; and have similar or matching ideas or motifs. The study does not identify proverbs that seem to contradict the virtues identified, rather, focus is on those that share certain similarities.

In investigating Akoto's methodological tools in dealing with the biblical text of Proverbs 25-29, Landsberg opines that Akoto makes use of rhetorical arguments in this regard, extracting symbols and ideas and explanatory elements from the text. She goes further to explain that “inculturation informing Akoto's theoretical framework becomes the basis of how she extracts symbols and ideas from the text, using rhetorical method in approaching the text as the methodological tools that she uses. Akoto's methodological tools, reclaiming constructive African cultural notions and reversing the effect that colonialisation has had on the African peoples show the degree to which Akoto's rhetorical process is informed by inculturation, as well as postcolonial thought. In an attempt to re-read biblical passages from the context of self-definition, Akoto reads Ewe notions into the text. Akoto's extraction of symbol and concept from the text rescues good elements of African culture as something valuable and workable in the modern world (Landsberg, 2013:110-111).

According to Yafeh-Deigh, Akoto's “contextual feminist reading allows the Bible, particularly the book of Proverbs, to become a relevant and transformative word of God within the Ghanaian social locations” (Yafeh-Deigh, 2021:65). Akoto's approach to the biblical text is informed by feminist, liberation theology and inculturation. Women's health: mental and physical wellbeing are also intimately tied up in Akoto's feminist approach. She links it to the Hebrew word *shalem*, derived from *shalom*. These words signify health and wellbeing for the whole person, not only physical, but also social and spiritual. Akoto stresses African symbols and meanings and prefixes the African experience as a point of view when approaching the biblical text (Landsberg, 2013:108). Landsberg observes that “although Akoto is critical of the patriarchal values within African culture, she is more critical of European and colonial patriarchal values that have been imposed on African peoples...Akoto's inculturation theology is seen where she works towards retrieving images and symbols from African culture and redeeming them, making them accessible African theological resources once again” (Landsberg, 2013:110).

Akoto's theological approach extracts theological meaning from these symbols and cultural elements and rhetorical ideas, particularly in the light of HIV/AIDS as to promote healthier theological models. For Akoto, it is important for theological models to be socially constructed in their

nature so that HIV and AIDS become the concern of every person in society and not just the concern of the people who live with it. Her use of images with regards to her inculturation is one way in which she defines theological and cultural structure inside African communities. The use of symbols and images and archetypes in this regard roots African experience of the theological in a very practical way. Akoto uses these images to illustrate how theology is understood and expressed by certain African communities (Landsberg, 2013:111).

One of the main images that Akoto employed in her biblical works is the image of the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23) and within the gospel of John. She reread them with Ewe notions of what it means to be a shepherd (Akoto, 2000:260-277). For Akoto, it is too abstract and foreign to hold the image of the Good Shepherd as merely the domain of God. Jesus is not just the Good Shepherd but he also acted to show example of what our attitude towards one another should be (Landsberg, 2013:111-112). Akoto brings the Ghanaian notion of shepherding into her interpretation of the text. The image of the shepherd is likened to people who perform roles of guiding or fighting for people in the society. She compares mothers and first-born daughters to shepherds in society. (Landsberg, 2013:113). Furthermore, the roles of the Ewe mother in the cultural context of the Ewe people can be seen as shepherding. She is the channel by which ancestors return to life, a homemaker as she bears children, takes care of them, loves, provides for and protects her family and also meets the needs of other extended family members. She is actively involved in the community's life.

As a local politician, she helps to maintain the smooth-running of life in the community. She is a custodian of law and order, ensuring that these are not violated but are carried out to provide for the welfare of the living and the goodwill of the leaving-dead (Akoto, 2000:267). Hence, for Akoto, women are not simply the timid creatures portrayed in Christianity but are active agents in society, working for the welfare of their families and the larger social space. The European image of the Good Shepherd is too abstract and foreign for Akoto, but to reclaim images like this, from the perspective and experiences of the peoples of Africa can provide concrete ways of self-definition and socially aware frameworks that can

better deal with social issues faced by people in Africa, especially women and children (Landsberg, 2013:113).

Akoto narrated the story of Trokosi practice in Ghana with similar stories of enslavement in the Bible (Akoto, 2006:96-110) with a few examples from Exodus 21:2; Leviticus 25:39-41; Nehemiah 5:4-5; 2 Kings 4:1-7. Akoto sees this story echoed in the plight of “both men and women theologians” in speaking out against cultural practices and “scriptural authority” (Akoto, 2006:105) that enslave women and children and put them into situations where they are exploited and dehumanized. Her linking of the story of Elisha and the Trokosi is not only a call on the church, but also on government and cultural authorities that reinforce systems of slavery and the abuse of women. (Landsberg, 2013:115). Akoto calls for an African feminist framework through which this contextualization protects the rights of women and children. She does not mention the risk that this poses for all individuals who are a part of the Trokosi practice with regards to infection of HIV/AIDS. However, Akoto does deal with HIV/AIDS and the Bible, but her theological process changes in that she seems to abandon some of her feminist and inculturation categories at times and concerns herself with more rhetorical models that are life-affirming theologies.

Akoto uses the story of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 as a metaphor for people living with HIV/AIDS. She asks the question as it was posed to Ezekiel by Yahweh (Akoto, 2004:97), “Can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3b and Akoto, 2004:97). HIV/AIDS has left many people in Africa in a state of total despair. People living with HIV/AIDS are likened to “the dry bones” in the valley”. Ezekiel 37:1-14 is situated in the context of the Babylonian Exile (Akoto, 2004:99; cf. Landsberg, 2013:116). Akoto compares the situation of the people living with HIV/AIDS with the devastating exilic situation. She spends time to explain that everybody in the world lives with HIV/AIDS; one may not be infected, but all are certainly affected (Akoto, 2004:100f.). In speaking out in prophecy for the people who live with HIV/AIDS, Akoto invokes God as a vital force in society, bringing people back from the dead and revitalizing them. Consequently, she prophesied to the people like Ezekiel.

We, like Ezekiel, act not of our own accord, but on behalf of God, a larger ethic that seeks to heal and to bring people out of desolation. We

have to call God to breathe life back into the bodies of the devastated, to offer them hope for a full and fulfilling life. Just as Ezekiel called Israel back to their homeland, we are to call people living with HIV/AIDS back to society, to reintegrate them as *bona fide* members of society (Akoto, 2004:105-107). This implies humbly accepting every member and empathizing with them in order to heal them (Akoto, 2004:110). Akoto criticizes patriarchal frameworks that would undermine the rights and well-being of women and children on the basis of culture. She uses rhetorical means of deriving meaning from the biblical text and in distinguishing between what she considers to be African versus foreign and colonial theologies (Landsberg, 2013:116). She envisions a human society that allows for self-definition, self-expression and self-determination. She foresees a possible future in which the voices of women and children are heard alongside those of men; fighting not only for the benefit and interests of men, but also to provide theologies of life and rebirth, in order to reclaim the dead (Akoto, 2006:105; cf. Landsberg, 2013:117).

### **Possible Application to Future World and Work**

Although the “hermeneutic of grafting” which Akoto developed and exhibited in her book is undertaken only in relationship to the biblical Book of Proverbs and Eve folk sayings, the main features of this hermeneutic may also be relevant for understanding how other biblical discourses might be grafted on to other sorts of African discourses that are more effectively encountered and involved in Africa. Akoto’s book used mainly Eve folk sayings. Her approach of hermeneutic of grafting can be replicated within other African cultures, utilizing the virtues that are identified, which are not unique to the Ghanaian Eve people. The virtues identified are general categories, which can be applied in any cultural group. Ramantswana highlights this by providing proverbs from his own cultural group; the Vhavenda people, which also deal with the issue of diligence with particular reference to the issue of laziness and poverty (Ramantswana, 2017:360). Akoto’s study does not identify proverbs that seem to contradict the virtues which she identified in the work. The focus is rather on those that share certain similarities. There are other ways in which African proverbs can be employed (Heerden, 2006:429-440; 2002:462-475; cf. Ramantswana, 2017:362-364).

For example, they can be used as hermeneutical lenses through which to interpret the Bible. Masenya utilizes Biblical proverbs as lenses to critically engage with the Biblical text. This way of utilizing African knowledge systems is not an uncritical one. As Masenya (2004:61-63) would argue, there are oppressive elements within both our African cultures and the Bible which we have to negate while appropriating the positive elements (Masenya, 2004:61-63). They can be used to illustrate Biblical passages which are exemplified in Tshivenda proverbs that can also be seen in other parts of Africa. Proverbs can be illustrated by a Biblical passage (Ramantswana, 2016:178-203). They can also be used to show contradictions between the Biblical text and African tradition. Ramantswana, following up on Adamo's work 2001, on Africans in the Bible, proposes to investigate the connectivities between African sources of knowledge and the Bible through the connection of the Egyptian wisdom literature Amenemopet.

While Ramantswana recognizes the potential gains from the hermeneutic of grafting, she argues that the approach risks undermining its own gains, as the African tree of life ends up becoming a hybridized tree; producing hybridized fruit. She questions "such imagery as cutting, blending, and production of hybridized fruits different from that of either of the two plants, associated with the hermeneutic of grafting" (Ramantswana, 2017:351-352). The approach seems to reproduce that which it seeks to overcome. (Ramantswana, 2017:358). This hermeneutic of grafting signals a refusal to bow down to the Biblical text as the dominant other; and it is rather the Biblical other that has to submit to the African order? There should be a way that both of them can be grafted without any of them bowing down to the other. Akoto's hermeneutic of the rising of the dry bones can be appropriated in other social, gender and political contexts in Africa and elsewhere where people are experiencing similar devastating situations. The concrete way in which she utilizes the image of the good shepherd can also be used in other contexts.

## Concluding Remarks

Dorothy Akoto engages in contextual feminist theology and theology of liberation. She proposes theological models that are life-affirming. Her

theological hermeneutics were construed in the context of postcolonialism. Her interpretations critiqued oppressive discriminatory powers, caused by the negative effects of patriarchy, colonialism, and other forms of discriminations which have affected the self-esteem and even the African epistemological system. Africans, particularly women and children should after the example of Akoto, affirm and convince themselves that “these dry bones can live again”. The main purpose of Akoto’s theological/Biblical interpretations, as evident in her works, is the emancipation and liberation of women, children and the oppressed in Africa at large. It is one of those attempts of hearing, reading and interpreting the scriptures with “African spectacles”. Akoto’s hermeneutics can rightly be considered a delinking from the shackles of colonialism and coloniality and a relinking with our African cultures, heritage, and knowledge systems. I agree with Akoto that “Biblical interpretation is like the baobab tree and no single scholar, group of scholars or any human society, regardless of their socio-political, economic, religious hegemonic or what-have-you orientations has been and probably will be able to embrace it single-handedly”.

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## 8 | THE POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS OF ALICE YAFEH-DEIGH

*Marceline L. Yele*

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the postcolonial feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Alice Yafeh-Deigh. It is motivated by the writing project goals of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which seeks to highlight the contribution of African Women theologians to scholarly discussions on African Liberation theologies. The paper thus seeks to interrogate the context underlying the works of Yafeh-Deigh, and her contribution to scholarship. Using a feminist analytical approach, this paper examines her methodology and engagements with other scholars in her area of specialty. The approaches she uses suggests that the Cameroonian-born feminist theologian applies a cultural study through liberation postcolonial approaches, to address the male-centred methods in biblical interpretations that marginalize women's experiences. Through these approaches, Yafeh-Deigh exposes epistemological foundations that seek to place women in a category that do not reflect their experiences. This paper submits that her scholarship needs to be celebrated for its great contribution to biblical interpretation and the critique of patriarchal domination of women. Hinging on the contextual realities of Bamessing women, she advocates for a method to interpret scriptures, that enables the intersection between culture and scriptures to be addressed. This paper discusses Yafeh-Deigh's feminist paradigm, which does not only criticize inculturation, but deviates from androcentric methodologies. It notes that her greatest contribution is the liberative aspect of her hermeneutics, seen where scriptures that seem to put women down become liberative and empowering.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, feminist, Biblical Hermeneutics, Cameroon, Bamessing, women's experiences, androcentrism, patriarchal domination,

## Introduction

Alice Yafeh-Deigh is a Cameroonian born feminist biblical scholar currently based in the United States of America. In her several writings, she employs her personal experiences through migration across different cultural borders and worlds. By migrating from Cameroon to the USA, she finds herself caught up between her patriarchal birth culture and the diasporan culture into which she has been educated and is pursuing her career as a professor of biblical studies. Although several cultures are patriarchal and oppress women in diverse ways and different magnitudes, Yafeh-Deigh uses the Bamessing culture to expose misogyny and discrimination against women with the view of advocating for gender justice in society. Her research interests are founded on a feminist belief that the world can be better and women can be treated fairly, so, she uses several writings to express this conviction. Feminism is a broadly applied term for approaches to scholarship that seeks to liberate women from all forms of oppression. Set within biblical studies feminism consider to varying degrees the relationship of the biblical text to women's experiences. As a postcolonial liberation feminist biblical scholar, Yafeh-Deigh employs several theoretical, literary, exegetical and hermeneutical approaches ranging from cultural criticism, to socio-critical criticism, intertextuality, and others to address themes. This paper explores some of these interdisciplinary methods Yafeh-Deigh employs in interpreting some biblical texts. The interest of the paper is to expose and celebrate her contributions to postcolonial and liberationist readings of scriptures. It is therefore structured as follows: academic background; themes addressed in the writings; the Cultural Studies and Postcolonial approaches; Alice Yafeh-Deigh/African Women's Contexts; the methodology in conversation with Liberation and Inculturation hermeneutics; the methodology in conversation with African liberative feminist approaches that empower women; and Conclusion.

## Academic Background

Alice Yafeh-Deigh is a holder of PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary, USA. She is an adjunct professor in the Department of Biblical and

Religious Studies at Azuza Pacific Seminary. Her areas of expertise, research and teaching interest include New Testament exegesis, Greco-Roman sexual ethics, cultural hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics, postcolonial hermeneutics, and literary and rhetorical methods of biblical interpretation. Her approach to the New Testament strongly emphasizes the historical and sociocultural influences that gave rise to individual texts. She has been engaged in teaching for several years and the courses she teaches include Paul the Pastor & Theologian, The Gospels and Christology, Luke/Acts; Life and Teachings of Jesus; Thessalonian and Corinthian Epistles, Women in Biblical Tradition, Global Biblical Interpretation, Senior Seminar, Biblical Theology and Ethics. Yafeh-Deigh has been engaged in several research ventures since 1998 and has also published several books and articles. In 2008, Alice Yafeh-Deigh reviewed *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, written by Alice Ogden Bellis. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30(1) 91-92. In 2012, she published an article, *The Liberative Power of Silent Agency: Reading Mary (Luke 10:38-42) Through the Eyes of Cameroonian Rural Women*. In Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (eds) (2012:408-417) *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*. In 2015, Yafeh-Deigh wrote another article, *Paul's Sexual and Marital Ethics in 1 Corinthians 7. An African -Cameroonian Perspective*, In *Bible and Theology in Africa*, New York: Peter Lang, INC. (2018). *Rethinking Paul's Sexual Ethics within the Context of HIV and AIDS: A Postcolonial Afro-Feminist-Womanist-Perspective*. In Madipoane Masenya and Kenneth Numfor Ngwa (eds) (2015:20-39) *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from Our Pots and Our Calabashes*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Also, in 2020, she published an article, *African Feminist Theology*, In Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology* (85-104). Still in 2020, Alice Yafeh-Deigh published another article, *A Re-evaluation of Jesus and His Family's Migration Story through the Framework of Inter-Dependent Hospitality*. In Musa W. Dube and Paul L. Leshota (eds) *Breaking the Master's S.H.I.T. Holes: Doing Theology in the Context of Global Migration Contact Zone/Explorations in Intercultural Theology* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 25-37). In 2020, Alice also published *Children, Motherhood, and the Social Death of Childless Women: The Social and Theological Construction of*

Infertility in the Hebrew Bible and in Cameroon. *Biblical Interpretation* 28(5), 608-634 (DOI:10.1163/15685152-2805A005). In 2021, Yafeh-Deigh co-published *Vision and Re-Envision: Re-Tracing the Social Justice Relationship Between Hannah and Mary's Songs*. In Max J. Lee and B.J. Oropeza (eds), *Practicing Intertextuality: Ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman Exegetical Techniques in the New Testament* 91(8), Eugene/OR: Cascade Books, pp. 70-79.

## Themes addressed in Alice Yafeh-Deigh's Writings

Yafeh-Deigh discusses several social and gender justice themes in her writings some of which are considered in this paper. The selected themes that are central to feminist concerns include the unjust social order in polygamous marriages with particular focus on the pre-conversion period of polygamists, inter-dependent hospitality in the context of migration, the social alienation of women with fertility disability, dismantling social and religious norms that sustain discriminatory practices, allowing everyone to feel the redistributive effects of God's social justice activities.

### *The Unjust Social Order in Polygamous Marriages*

Alice Yafeh-Deigh (2015:187) identifies with the feminist agenda for social and gender justice for all in the church, home and society. She orients her advocacy towards the Afro-womanist-feminists who are deeply committed to women's emancipation. She acknowledges that she has an inescapable duty to maintain a critical but constructive voice within the system and to challenge the church to take a stand for the establishment of a just social order'. In this vein, she seeks to unveil the unjust social order in polygamous marriages with particular focus on the pre-conversion period of polygamists in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC).

Yafeh-Deigh discusses the exegetical, translational and text critical issues in 1 Corinthians 7. The essence is to address the oppression of women in pre-conversion polygamous marriages among the Bamessing of Cameroon. She brings out Paul's sexual ethics and marital ethics in 1 Corinthians 7 using cultural criticism, a methodology that analyses the different ways in which the Bible has been received and interpreted in

the different cultures that encounter it. Yafeh-Deigh in her methodology recognizes dimensions of meaning or background of biblical texts that enable her to apply to her context, a process called contextualization. Yafeh-Deigh (2015:180) is concerned with pre-conversion marriages in the PCC within the broader institution of traditional marriage patterns in Cameroon. She uses the Bamessing context to point out the problems of patriarchal structured marriages in general and plural marriages in particular. Yafeh-Deigh shares her personal experiences where her mother got married at the age of 14 to a man who already had a first wife. She identifies that such marriages rooted in the unjust oppressive systems contribute to the violation of women's civil rights. She raises the critical issue of community blaming or ostracising childless women in such marriages, especially when their financial situation precludes them from using alternative means to have children. Consequently, childless women spend their whole lives suffering from both societal and family rejection.

Yafeh-Deigh (2015:172) addresses the issue of pre-conversion polygyny using Paul's pastoral and pedagogical principle in 1 Corinthians 7 as a model. She alludes to Paul's ultimate goal of single-minded devotion to the Lord suggesting that it can serve as a foundational principle as follows: there should be equal relationship in marriage grounded in mutual submission and service; those in mixed marriages should not separate or divorce after conversion because the unions were valid in God's sight (1 Corinthians 7:14), and did not hinder devotion to the Lord; also, analogically, both men and women in polygamous families who convert should be baptised and given full membership status in the church, and coached to live to serve the Lord with no recourse to separation or divorce; finally, as Paul disallowed post-conversion mixed marriages (1 Corinthians 7:39), PCC should emulate to prohibit post-conversion polygamous marriages.

Using her womanist liberation approach, Yafeh-Deigh (2015:175) vocalises that polygamy has strengths and weaknesses through empowerment and disempowerment of women. Empowerment offers women a place to be economically provided for and sheltered by a man, but asymmetrical relations that prioritise maleness over femaleness disempowered women. Yafeh-Deigh (2015:184) notes that polygamous marriage



enforces power inequities and sanctions women's perpetual subordination, oppression, and alienation. Notwithstanding, many women prefer polygamy to divorce due to the emotional trauma and economic distress that accompany a divorce. Yafeh-Deigh (2015:175) argues on the other hand that since institutionalized gender discrimination in Cameroon hinders the application of equal rights, mutual love, and partnership between spouses in a polygamous marriage, divorce could be an option after careful thought.

### ***Inter-Dependent Hospitality in The Context of Migration***

Alice Yafeh-Deigh is not only interested in social justice within multi-marriages, she shows interest in injustices perpetrated against migrants. Her main argument concerns the rhetoric of Donald Trump, the immediate past president of the USA, who exhibits social exclusion in his declarations and discourse of transnational border-crossing. Alice Yafeh-Deigh uses two texts, Matthew 2:3, and 15:21-28, to develop a hermeneutic of inter-dependent hospitality to address Christian moral obligations towards the 'Other', identified as the stranger and immigrant (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:16). Yafeh-Deigh interprets the first story of the migration of Jesus and his family to Egypt. She underscores the hostility and danger Jesus and his parents faced as they fled to Egypt to take refuge there and hide from the tyrannical Herod the Great. For her, the story exposes the vulnerability of millions of children born in conflict zones, fleeing with their parents across borders, searching for secure places. She submits that as immigrants in Egypt, Jesus and his family depended on the generosity of a foreign host country to survive. She hypothesises that the refugee status of Jesus and his family exposed them to a broad spectrum of vulnerabilities. However, Jesus' 'enduring memory and reminder of the event through the parents retelling' and his proximity to immigrants, suggest that migration has a positive contribution to make in discourse. Jesus' discourse on migration must have developed from his encounter with the Roman oppressors, foreign slaves, and dislocated non-Jews. Yafeh-Deigh notes that this interaction shapes Jesus interaction with strangers, particularly the gentiles.

Yafeh-Deigh (2020:15) also interprets Matthew's story recorded in 15:21-28. She uses this narrative of Jesus' encounter with a gentile

woman to emphasize the theme of inter-dependent hospitality or lack thereof, and the theme of movements across borders. She notes that the first story Matthew 2:3, is a foreshadow of this second story that projects Jesus' treatment of the Canaanite mother, and so it functions as a yard stick, the ultimate litmus test for how Jesus responds to and practices hospitality towards strangers. The analytical framework of Yafeh-Deigh is an interdisciplinary critical methodology that is informed by narrative-critical and postcolonial-feminist perspectives (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:15). She uses a narrative critical analysis explaining that the post-colonial-feminist perspective does not minimise the lived experiences of immigrants, women, and those who face oppressive marginalization and violence at the hands of cultures at large. She thus uses her own social location as an immigrant with diasporic identity factors woven into her theological interpretation to address the plight of migrants.

Yafeh-Deigh (2020:24) employs the term 'Other' drawn from a post-colonial perspective. This interpretation is in line with the Postcolonial theory, a cultural critical theory associated with Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism*, he exposes the Western creation of the orient as an imperialist tool to control the nature and shape of the knowledge of the colonised (Said, 1979:7-9). Dube (2000:1, 47) and Sujirtharajah (1999:15) acknowledge that Said's work marked the beginning of discussions on postcolonial theory. Scholars have variously applied a postcolonial critique to biblical interpretation. Sujirtharajah (1999:15) notes that post-colonial Biblical interpretation seeks to interrogate Biblical narratives, texts and interpretations that legitimize and re-inscribe colonial tendencies. The interest of the interpretation lies not on the historical truths but to find out colonial ideologies in the text. Dube (2000:1, 23) shows that postcolonial Biblical interpretation is an approach of reading the Bible in a way that the postcolonial subjects confront, expose and arrest imperialist strategies. Yafeh-Deigh applies the theory to examine the effects of imperialist views on postcolonial immigrants from non-western societies. She concludes that radical hospitality is expected towards the most vulnerable in society, the stranger and manifold forms of the 'Other', symbolised in the texts as immigrants or stranger (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:27).

### *The social death alienation of women with fertility disability*

Another theme that Alice Yafeh-Deigh explores and which is central to feminist concerns is the poor condition of childless Christian women. In a published paper, she uses several Old Testament scriptures to review the tension between the biblical mandate to have children versus the claim that God holds the exclusive power to open wombs (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:6). Yafeh-Deigh (2020:5) examines the social and cultural implications of the theological assertion for procreative disadvantaged women in the Hebrew Bible like Sarah (Genesis 16), Rebecca (Genesis 25), Rachel (Genesis 29-30), Samson's mother (Judges 13) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1). She holds that the pervasive literary and theological motif that procreation is always contingent on God opening the womb is of central importance to her understanding of barrenness and childlessness. She uses several examples Eve (Gen. 4:1, 25); Sarah (Gen. 21:6); Leah (Gen. 29:32-35; 30:18-20); Rachel (Gen. 30:6, 23-24); Hannah (1 Sam. 20, 27); and Elizabeth (Luke 1:25) to substantiate that each of these women gave birth after a struggle, and attested to God's agency. Yafeh-Deigh and Roth (2021) make the following thrusts:

**First**, the interpretation of Psalm 139:13 and Job 10:8–12 is that children as the 'most prized grace-gift of God', thus God values children and is involved in the procreative and gestational process of those unborn. **Second**, procreation according to Genesis 1:28 is a divine blessing and command, thus all humanity is mandated to have children. **Third**, the mandate reinforces the religious idea that encourages reproduction in which humans need to partner with God in an intricate partnership; **Fourth**, God has given humans the potential to procreate but that role is contingent on the degree of human relationship with God in an interdependent divine-human arrangement. **Finally**, children are the result of such 'double agency'. Similarly, this procreative blessing-mandate correlates with the patriarchal pro-natal cultural norms of ancient Israel thus fostering the notion that motherhood implies giving birth to biological children. Yafeh-Deigh laments that this genetic-motherhood expectation is problematic, it ostracises women with 'infertility impairment' due to their inability to fulfil their biological gender functions. They are subjected to stigma and prejudice since having children is considered as a social obligation, not a choice.

Following the above submissions Yafeh-Deigh (2020:6) employs a feminist cultural hermeneutics approach with its assumption that all readers read and interpret the Bible from their social locations, and with specific interests in mind. She concludes that in patriarchal society, womanhood was associated with motherhood with the assumption that motherhood is the highest state of womanhood. Also, women's social statuses within their homes and larger community depended on being biological mothers. In addition, barren women in the Bible had diverse perspectives about their situation: For Sarah (Gen. 16:2), it was the Lord that inhibited her from procreating (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:9); Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24) considered her barrenness as a reproach (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:14). She comments that the matriarchs with 'infertility impairment' were determined to become mothers and assume their social and religious responsibilities. Yafeh-Deigh (2020:14) contends that the yearnings project the increasing tension between divine-human partnership in the procreative process. The narratives indicate the vulnerability of childless women stigmatised and stereotyped in pronatal societies, and also facing social, cultural, economic and religious disadvantages.

Yafeh-Deigh (2020:14) uses intersectionality to outline the complexity of prejudices biblical women face as a result of systematic and structural arrangements that allow for status differences, oppression in patriarchal representation of motherhood to serve the interests of the patriarch, and the vulnerability faced due to 'fertility disability'. Yafeh-Deigh (2020:17-20) proceeds to contextualise these findings listing the challenges a barren Bamessing woman goes through which include; duress to reproduce otherwise they are socially isolated and stigmatized, constraints from traditional norms and social values regarding family, desire to produce legitimate children who can continue the family lineage, tragedy and trauma due to economic disadvantages (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:19-20). The critical issue in these challenges is that a woman with 'fertility disability' is often blamed for her situation, with no proper gynaecological diagnosis. She calls for a redefinition of motherhood and change in attitudes concerning childlessness, and suggests that this can be done through re-socialization. Yafeh-Deigh (2020:24) also calls for a reconceptualization of motherhood in the manner of Ruth-Naomi's inter-

dependent hospitality’ (a theme Yafeh-Deigh revisits in her paper on migration). She exemplifies that such a relationship of motherhood and mothering modalities brought about quality of life and experience of empowerment and emancipation’.

***Dismantling social and religious norms that sustain discriminatory practices***

This theme runs in a paper Yafeh-Deigh co-authored with Roth (2021:122-140). The authors employ intertextuality to discuss the issue of social justice and reversal of social norms in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55. They trace the social justice dimension in Hannah’s song (1 Samuel 2:1-10) from the structure, identifying four parts; First, the physical features of the body as metonymies for human and divine characteristics that follow a certain pattern, second, acknowledging God’s sovereign actions over human history and the cosmos, third, a description of the social realities experienced (or to be experienced by God’s people) and fourth, a reiteration of God’s sovereignty over the affairs of individuals, nations and all creation.

They opine that the song reimages the status quo in ways that reaffirm the value of all human beings-the disenfranchised and the powerful alike. In this light, the song’s purpose is to persuade, encourage, and perhaps entice its reader to hope for a way out of the degradation of the Judges period which forms the immediate literary and historical context. The song anticipates that the dealings of God with Hannah, could be extended to Israel. By this Israel could experience a new type of coming to life. Yafeh-Deigh and Roth (2021:131) submit that Hannah’s poem brings out Yahweh’s commitment to Israel. It involves the ‘recasting of expected social norms, the elevation of those on history’s underside and the humanisation of the affluent’. Since these would be accomplished by the coming king whose identity is not known, Hannah’s song leaves a gap which Mary’s song seeks to fill.

Yafeh-Deigh and Roth (2021) highlight two themes in Mary’s song: God’s graciousness and restorative justice on behalf of Mary (Luke 1:46-50); and God’s restorative actions for all marginalized as promise fulfilment (Luke 1:51-55). They observe that in the former, Mary’s con-

victions are rooted in 'God's subversive, countercultural and transformative' actions. In recollecting God's deeds Mary envisions a future that is driven by God's mercy and faithfulness, a theme they note, runs through the Gospel of Luke (1:79; 2:10, 14; 2:29-32; 3:6; 3:38; 4:16-30; 7:2-9; 10:30-37; 17:11-16; 24:47). God unilaterally initiates the envisaged future inaugurated in Mary's case and foreseen in the reversal of fortunes. Yafeh-Deigh and Roth (2012:134) explain that 'God who is subverting conventional expectations is not just interested in Mary or Israel but in all people, particularly the ones that fear God. In the latter, Yafeh-Deigh and Roth identify that the focus of Mary's song is on dismantling social and religious norms that sustain discriminatory practices, allowing everyone to feel the redistributive effects of God's social justice activities (2021:137). Their central hypothesis is that God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham intertextually ties Mary's song to that of Hannah. They find the unrealized promise that creates social justice expectations in Hannah's song being fulfilled in Mary's song. They conclude that both songs are masterpieces sung by female characters, where the dominant theme of social justice stands as the focal point and unifying theme. (Yafeh-Deigh and Roth, 2021:135).

## **The Cultural Studies and Postcolonial approaches of Alice Yafe-Deigh**

Alice Yafeh-Deigh's publications fall under African feminist approaches to biblical scholarship. The most prominent include womanism, black feminism, *mujerista* theology, Asian Feminist theology, Dalit women's theology, *minjung* feminist theology, African Feminism, concerned African women's theology, *Africana* womanism, Ubuntu feminism, and Bosadi feminism. Yafeh-Deigh (2020:2) elucidates that these various articulations are grounded in the 'actual experiences, emancipation struggles, and the complex historical and cultural realities of the particular communities of women'. She notes further that each perspective, nevertheless, is unified in the goal of making women's lived experiences their central concern. Alice Yafeh-Deigh's work follows this unified goal combining text-oriented and reader-oriented hermeneutics to address various issues in scholarship. These feminists literary and liberative analytical

frameworks expose the interest of the author and her desire to critique male-oriented liberation methods that do not factor women's experiences. Graybill and Huber (2021:3) also opine that an important idea that comes from feminist theory is 'intersectionality'. Intersectionality describes the ways that gender and sexuality intersect with other forms of identity, such as race and class.

Feminist and Liberationist movements share a common commitment to the liberation of the disenfranchised on the world. Yafeh-Deigh's methods are interdisciplinary approaches cutting across feminism, liberation and postcolonialism sharing the same quest for social and gender justice. The categories of persons addressed include the disenfranchised, stigmatised and the marginalised in their search for full equality in marriage, the stigmatised women with 'fertility disability', and immigrants with different documentation status. This suggests that Yafeh-Deigh's writings are characterised by activism against inhumanity, oppression, sexism, and the racist domination of others. The critical approaches range from feminist to liberative hermeneutics that empower women to challenge the gender-orientation of patriarchy and its attendant male-bias and oppression of women.

Yafeh-Deigh thus uses the cultural hermeneutical approach to interpret scriptures in a bid to address oppressive patriarchal readings of scripture. This approach recognizes that every interpretation of the Bible must emerge from the encounter between the biblical text on the one hand, and the cultural context (what Yafeh-Deigh terms, social location) of Africans on the Other. Using this approach in interpreting 1 Corinthians 7 she sets out to correct the uncritical valorisation of African cultural values like polygyny that sanctions inequities between spouses and disempowers women who are more disadvantaged. She also uses postcolonial intersectional approaches to address the poor treatment of women with fertility disability, inviting scholarship to sustain the redefinition of motherhood and womanhood, and reconceptualise genetic birth with the Ruth-Naomi model of inter-dependent hospitality. Through cultural hermeneutics, Yafeh-Deigh makes the experiences of African women the interpretive framework, and facilitate readings which point out the liberative and oppressive aspects of scriptures for the welfare of women.

## Alice Yafeh's African Women's Contexts

Alice Yafeh-Deigh places her work within the broader framework of African Women hermeneutic which seeks to address patriarchy and its attendant consequences for women's oppression and domination. As noted with several Circle publications, the patriarchal background of Yafeh-Deigh resonates in her writings. Yafeh-Deigh's work is consistent with the current goals of the circle: to continue interrogating patriarchal influences and women's social, systematic, and institutionalised oppression in more complex ways; to engage more openly with male theologians; to offer more mentoring opportunities for untrained writers and theologians; and to increase dialogue with ecumenical organizations (Yafeh-Deigh, 2020:12). In her publications Yafeh-Deigh undoubtedly confirms Mojola's assertion that patriarchy is one 'elephant in the house' that sanctions all limitations placed on the African women (Mojola, 2018:2). The impact of patriarchy on African women's lives resonates in the articles in one of the most recent publications in honour of the Circle's founder and mother, Mercy Amba E. Oduyoye.

The editors suggested that scholarship that has a liberative focus must apply 'academic rigor and theological resistance against imperial powers, such as religion, patriarchy and colonialism' (Cowan, 2021:vi). O'Brien, (2013:6) conceptualises patriarchy from the 'generational continuity' principle which seeks to restore the primacy of paternity in an attempt to address male appropriation of female reproductive labour. However, there exists other institutions like kinship, economy and politics which are interwoven. The experiences of women differ from one patriarchal context to another depending on the intersection within the institutions. On a conceptual level, Lorber identifies three groups of feminists' definition of patriarchy. On the one hand, Radical feminists consider patriarchy as the structure and process of men's misogynist domination of women through violent control of their sexuality and progeny function. On the other side, Marxist feminists understand patriarchy from a political point as domination of women in the home by husbands, and also male domination of women in the capitalist marketplace where they work.

For the Psychoanalytic, patriarchy is a symbolic rule of the father through 'gendered sexuality and the unconscious domination of women'



(Lorber, 1994:6). In Africa no one contends that patriarchy is an institution where gender manifests in sexual division of labour, and men's oppression and domination of women. Lazar accords that patriarchy is a gendered ideology, structured, enacted and renewed in institutions, social practices that mediate between the individual and the social order (Lazar, 2007:8).

African Women theologians identify with these definitions of patriarchy where men dominate women and rule over them politically, socially, economically and wise. Dube (2009:133-134) describes the hermeneutical method as 'Talitha Cum', christened after the Congolese Kumba Vita who lived in the early 20th Century. Walking in the legacy of Kimpa Vita, African Women's Talitha Cum hermeneutics means living and insisting on staying alive even when confronted with oppressive powers that crush.

The gender factor has been central to African Women theologians in a bid to address misogyny and androcentric interpretation of texts that support the oppression of women. Oduyoye (1995:36) concurs that androcentric structures in which women operate are based on oppressive cultural notions that define women and seek to make them conform to 'male centred definitions, on the pain of marginalization and stigmatization'. Adasi (2016:3) agrees that gender-based segregation is largely evident in socio-economic and religious activities, patterns and roles set for women and men in traditional African societies. Dube (2002:112) avers that patriarchal oppression of women is as real as imperial oppression. African women theologians like Oduyoye (2004:36), Kanyoro (1992:99), and Dube (2009:133-134) and Fanusie (1989), have demonstrated that most discussions on women in religion and culture have been flawed by male chauvinistic perspectives. For instance, Oduyoye (1995:2) states that African men have prided themselves on having women who do not need to seek liberation as women. Oduyoye (2002:36) laments that socially, men are most often installed as 'lords over women', for the mere fact that they belong to another sex/gender. As a result, a few African male theologians like Kwesi Dickson (1968) and Obeng (1998:45) felt the need to address the how culture, tradition and religion oppress women. Obeng (1998:45) for instance notes that 'women are recognized under the shadows of men'). Such few voices are a whisper because as Oduyoye

(1995:80) observes, they are limited in addressing the fact that ‘the dynamic nature of cultures does not exclude the traditional foundations which have remained unchanged over time, and have continued to covertly and overtly shape women’s lives. Fanusie (1989:95) advocates that dehumanizing and demoralizing cultural practices should be challenged where and when it is necessary to do so. For instance, the plight of childless women, and women in multi marriages addressed in Alice Yafeh-Deigh’s writings, suggests that the stereotyping of sexes enforces women to accept their subordinate status. It is so hegemonic that no one sees it as oppression or domination (Pauwels, 2003:554).

### **Conversation with Feminist Biblical Interpretation for liberation and Transformation**

Alice Yafeh-Deigh writes from the context of the patriarchy and oppressive culture, thus situating her work within feminist theory that examines the relation between gender within biblical studies and cultural studies by locating it within this larger canvas of cultural identity issues. These are feminist concerns that have pre-occupied biblical interpreters. Wolcott (2016) gives four assumptions that have guided all their methods: First, women’s experiences form the hermeneutical starting point for their work; second, women’s experiences become a critical principle; third, the biblical text speaks liberation, not just reflecting on liberation and; fourth, the text is liberated to carry eschatological hope from God. Alice Yafeh-Deigh’s writings follow this paradigm *in toto*. The writings can thus be placed in conversation with feminist biblical interpreters especially African women theologians. The agenda is to ‘uncover the often-implicit sexism’ that impacts ‘cultural norms and philosophical assumptions’, to bring greater equality for women which in turn benefits all society (Magnum, 2014).

The feminist cultural hermeneutics approach makes the experiences of African women the interpretive framework. The approach critiques the idea that generalizes male experiences as ‘African experiences’, and makes male ‘identity’ and ‘sense of pride’ conterminous to ‘African identity’ and ‘sense of pride’ (Yele, 2022:79). The liberation perspective of

Yafeh-Deigh follows the African Women interpreters agenda to transform patriarchy, religion and culture where the majority of the adherents of Scriptures are transformed into subordinate human beings (West, 2008:6). This transformation is important to check Church practices that validate the oppression of women and bring societal change. Bartel (2001:11) points out that women are the 'growth points' of the Church today, constituting the majority of the membership. Maura (2005:411) concurs that whether in mainline Churches or African Instituted Churches, Charismatic movements or Pentecostal movements, women dominate the pews.

### **Conversation with Liberation and Cultural Hermeneutics**

Yafeh-Deigh's hermeneutics can be compared with Liberation and Cultural hermeneutics. Sujirtharajah (2002:105) identifies three types of liberation theologies, the classic liberation hermeneutics, people's reading and identity specific reading. He explains further that liberation theology is not a single genre but a series of genres, many of them interconnecting and speaking on behalf of many voices). Liberation theology introduced two hermeneutical categories that have entered the lexicon of biblical scholarship. These are the 'hermeneutical circle' and 'hermeneutics of suspicion' developed by Segundo (1976:7-38). Liberation theology therefore engages socio-economic analyses and also addresses other kinds of inequality based on race and caste. Yafeh-Deigh's work aptly utilises these two hermeneutical categories to address issues of social injustices within culture and religion.

Yafeh-Deigh's Cultural hermeneutics is an advocacy methodology that seeks to use biblical texts to support social justice. Yee (2013:54) gives the advantage of culture criticism that it 'offers one way to evaluate the many different and exciting ways the various cultures we inhabit encounter, appropriate, and venerate the sacred text'. Similar to liberation theology, scholars employ cultural criticism at the exegetical and application stage of their hermeneutics. Yafeh-Deigh draws biblical themes generated from exegesis to address issues in her culture and contexts, a process called contextualization. Spanje (1998:197-217) defines contextualization as an approach scholar use to draw lessons from biblical texts and apply

them cross-culturally to their contemporary contexts. The essence is to liberate the marginalized, fight for full equality, human rights, and a full life for all regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality and so on.

Some themes cut across liberation and feminist critiques; first, they critique frameworks of interpretation, second, they offer alternative re-interpretations, and third, they unmask the ways in which interpretations are used to serve the interests of those in power (Wolcott, 2016). Yafeh-Deigh's themes and point of departure can thus be compared with the themes and points of departure of both liberation and cultural criticism, from the perspective of advocacy, selective use of scriptures and application of themes that emerge to the cultural context, and the quest for equality, human rights, and justice. In her biblical hermeneutics, she also adopts the three-step approach of beginning with the experience of the people (textual or contextual), analysing or assessing the reasons for their condition and the tension involved, and suggesting concrete practical steps to ameliorate the social injustices against women in her cultural context. In her several writings she also employs inter-cultural application of the fruits of her exegesis. Yafeh-Deigh's work is therefore an advocacy against complex workings of power and ideology in discourses that sustains gendered social arrangements in patriarchal contexts. The description is fitting since it draws attention to the biblical author's and the interpreter's context in which socio-economic, political, religious and cultural activities of men and women are hierarchically ordered in a way that engenders asymmetry.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that writing from a patriarchal context, Alice Yafeh-Deigh seeks to show a practical application of her methods in liberating women from all forms of bondage. The paper notes that the Cameroonian born feminist theologian demonstrates through various writings, the significance of a cultural studies approach in interpreting biblical texts and applying them to contextual realities. The celebration of the achievements of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians warrants that this contribution to scholarship be highlighted.

Through her works, Yafeh-Deigh makes a contribution to scholarship on the cultural studies approach, liberation and postcolonial methods in interpreting biblical texts. Her use of the feminist paradigm critiques not only inculturation, but also deviates from male-centred liberation methodologies. The methodology as a critique of liberation and male-centred hermeneutics seeks to expose epistemological foundations that place women in a category that do not reflect their experiences. Comparing biblical women from the perspectives of privileged, superior status vs. unprivileged inferior statuses, she challenges cultural presuppositions that do not factor the experiences of those at the margins. Applying the methodology to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, to intertextuality between OT and NT texts, and the several OT texts that address the marginalisation and stigmatisation of women with fertility disability, she notes that the experiences of women differ from context to context, but women all over the world share some common challenges. Her innovative inter-dependent hospitality theory that cuts across several works exposes the advantages of interdisciplinarity in Biblical hermeneutics. The liberative aspect of her hermeneutics is seen in the advocacy for all types of justice including social, gender, economic, migration, and others. Touching on the contextual realities of Cameroonian women, she advocates for a method to interpret scriptures, that enables the intersection between culture and scriptures to be addressed. Yafeh-Deigh employs a feminist cultural hermeneutics to critique the definition that restricts motherhood to genetic-biological connections, and disparage motherhood. Thus, every biblical interpreter is invited to heed to her call for a re-conceptualization re-definition of male-centred cultural and contextual values and epistemologies that impinge on women's lives.

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## 9 | REMEMBERING DORCAS AKINTUNDE'S FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

*Elizabeth Aderonke Bolaji*

### **Abstract**

The subject of women in societal development has continued to attract scholarly attention globally. Much more attention is being shifted to roles and status of women as they play significant roles in family and the society at large. Ajayi and Ayantayo opined “Women are perceived to be the conscience of the nation and their contributions to society and humanity is enormous.” Though in most part of the world women are regarded as the weaker sex. Also most of the time, women are at the receiving ends of many socio-political ill-treatment, economic deprivations and social isolations. This study seeks to read into the works of Professor Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, and her liberation theology. Dorcas Akintunde is an astute intellectual and scholar on New Testament and Women Studies; who distinguished herself in several key roles, some of which were customarily dominated by men in our patriarchal society. She also made invaluable contributions to intellectual pursuits and dissemination of ideas in her chosen field of study. This study captures Dorcas’ intellectual interest and elucidates her theology of the place of women in societal development. It also projects her immense participation and contributions to local and international projects on HIV/ AIDS discourse and projects in Africa, Europe, America and Asia. This is captured especially among women groups. This study is out to answer questions like: What were the theological context(s) that informed her work? What were the theological sources used by her work? What were her theology set to achieve? How did her theology converse with African male theologians and western feminist theologians? How did her theological ideas disavow patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, tribalism and gender/disability-based discrimination? And what are the main strengths and contributions of her theology to the world of knowledge? The instrument for this study is interview.

**Keywords:** Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, Women Theology, HIV/AIDS, New Testament Studies

## Brief Biography of Prof. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde

Professor Dorcas Adebanke Akintunde, an astute intellectual and scholar on women studies lived from February 22, 1961 to March 15, 2011. She was born into the family Pastor Moses Ajibade Amusan and Madam Mariam Amusan (nee Adekanmbi) of Ibadan in the South-Western part of Nigeria. The girl Banke Amusan fondly called Banke (later Mrs. Akintunde) was born into a family of a priest in the Christ Apostolic Church. Banke was the youngest daughter of Pastor and Mrs. Amusan and the third child in the family of four children (Ajayi, 2015:2). Born into a priestly family, it was natural that all her “activities as a youth revolved round the church and its environment (Akintunde, 1997:1).

Banke was born and brought up to play her part in the ancient city of Ibadan, a historic town that served at various times and through changing scenes as the headquarters of Western Region, Western State, Old Oyo State and the present day Oyo State (Ajayi, 2015:1). According to S. Ademola Ajayi, at Nigeria’s independence in 1960, Ibadan was an impressive and sprawling urban centre. It was the largest and most populous city in the country and the third in Africa, after Cairo and Johannesburg. The following year when Banke was born, 1961, was quite significant in the political history of the city in that it was a year of major political change. That year, Ibadan city was separated from its rural district and constituted into a city council, known as Ibadan City Council (ICC) with the Olubadan (the monarch of Ibadan) as the president (Ajayi, 2015:2).

Prof. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, then called Banke Amusan had her primary school education at the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) Primary School, Oniyanrin, Ibadan from 1967 – 1972. She proceeded to the famous Queen of Apostle’s Secondary Commercial Grammar School, Oloyoro, Oke-Offa, Ibadan between 1973 and 1977 for her secondary education. “While in secondary school, she never displayed the traits of a genius or future scholar. This is clearly discernible from her principal’s remarks in her end-of-session report of her promotion examination from Form II to Form III that “This is a very poor result. Unless there is a big improvement in class III she will be asked to withdraw. Promoted on trial (Hayes, 1974).” That frank comment by her missionary principal must have gingered her to put in more effort, the result of which was she not

being asked to withdraw. Rather, she passed out successfully in 1977 at the age of 16. As a secondary school student, the young Dorcas derived enormous inspiration and knowledge from her teachers, especially the white missionaries who tutored and mentored her (Ajayi, 2015:2).

In 1979, Dorcas moved out of the city of Ibadan to attend the Government Teachers' Training College (GTTC), where she qualified as a trained and certified teacher in 1980. Dorcas Akintunde's initial ambition, as a young school leaver was to be a nurse. In her own words, "I longed to be a nurse due to the fact that nurses are smart, neat and beautiful when in their uniform (Akintunde, 1997:1). Her move to secure admission into school of nursing was not successful; therefore, she sought admission to a college of education in 1982 – Wesley College, Elekuro, Ibadan campus of the Oyo State College of Education, Ilesa (now Osun State). She applied for admission to a three-year National Certificate of Education programme (NCE). However, as she was proposing, God did not permit it but she was fortunate in that she got admission for a 2-year Diploma course in the Department of Religious Studies of University of Ibadan. She went further and got a Diploma in Religious Studies (with Distinction in Islamic Studies) in 1984. Then, her eyes were opened to the university education. One of the notable mentors then was Dr. (later Prof.) Samuel Oyin Abogunrin who taught her New Testament Studies. Dorcas registered for a Bachelor's Degree programme in the same department and she obtained a B.A. (Hons.) in Religious Studies in 1988. Bent on greater academic laurels, she also embarked on the M.A. programme in Religious Studies, which she completed in 1991. At this time, the scholar in her was already in the making, so, after two-year teaching experience in a secondary school, Banke's passion for further education led her to apply for a PhD-programme at the same university of Ibadan. In 2001, she obtained a PhD degree in Religious Studies from the University of Ibadan (Ajayi, 2015:3).

### *Her Career*

Dorcas Akintunde had her entire working career within that academic setting. She began work as Grade II teacher in 1981 at Gbedun Community Grammar School, Gbedun near Akanran in Oyo State. She later proceeded to the University of Ibadan for further studies, for a Diploma, then for Bachelor's degree in Religious Studies. She immediately went for her

Masters degree. She taught at Aponmade High School, Moniya, Ibadan from 1991 – 1993. From there she was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan in 1993. At the time of her appointment in Ibadan, all other members of staff were male (ten in number). By implication, she was the eleventh staff and she was the only female lecturer. She rose through the ranks from Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer II (1996-1999); Lecturer I (1999-2002); Senior Lecturer (2002-2006), Reader (2006-2010); and became a professor in 2010. This was a result of her deep interest in scholarship, particularly in New Testament and Women Studies. It is significant to note that at the University of Ibadan where Dorcas Akintunde flowered, she had a working stint of exactly eighteen years from the date of her assumption of duty as Assistant Lecturer on March 15, 1993 to March 15, 2011 when she died as a full professor, effective from October 1, 2010 (Ajayi, 2015:3-4). Her years in the University of Ibadan saw her through teaching, researching, writing, supervising, leading and mentoring younger academics.

Dorcas Akintunde emerged as an academic whose reputation transcended her intellectual base in Ibadan, and even the shores of Nigeria. She was an external examiner to other universities and allied tertiary institutions. She was also a visiting fellow to a number of universities and allied institutions in Africa, Europe, America, Asia and Australia (Akintunde, 1997:1). She registered for a Dmin / PhD programme in San Francisco, a programme in which she was writing something on Luke and was being supervised by Prof. Musa Dube. Even though she could not finish the project, she confided in her supervisor, Prof Musa, that it has helped her to get her promotion (Musa, 2023).

### ***Honours, Distinctions and Laurels***

Before the time of demise of Prof Dorcas Akintunde in March 15, 2011, she had become a brand name among female academics in her field, much sought after, even in first-rate universities globally (Akintunde, 2011:1). For example, University of South Africa offered her Research Fellowship (Makhanya, 2010). Dorcas Akintunde won several scholarships, fellowships and prizes. These included Mrs Jokotola Sebanjo Memorial prize, for the best female student in the department of Religious Studies, University of

Ibadan in 1988; Bishop Kale Prize for the best student in the same department in the same year; Post-doctorate Fellow of Yale University, New Haven, USA between 2005 and 2006; Fellow of the Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom in 2008; Research Fellow in the Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa from August 1, 2010 to July 31, 2013.

Prof. Akintunde was also a member of many professional bodies within and outside Nigeria where she played prominent roles and distinguished herself. Notable among these societies are West African Association of Theological Institutions (WAATI), Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa, Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, International Associations for Missions, African Association for Study of Religions and Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, Georgia. In all these scholarly societies, she served as head, treasurer or editor at a time or the other.

She belonged to the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) Worldwide where she was appointed as a deaconess in 2002. This ordination looked like the crowning glory of her spiritual services. The recognition and opportunity that this provided her for service to God in her church in this honorary capacity must have quenched in her the lifelong thirst, appetite and yearning for the ordained ministry which she never fully relinquished till she breathed her last breath. Even then, she was never fully realized because of what she perceived as the patriarchal system in her church that refused ordination for women (Akintunde, 1997:2). Yet, the opportunity given her as a teacher sufficed to give her fulfillment as she had opportunities to teach priests in the university as well as colleges of theology and Bible schools in and around Ibadan (Akintunde, 1997:2).

### ***Akintunde in Administration***

Prof. Dorcas Akintunde served in various administrative capacities at the University of Ibadan. She served as the Faculty of Arts Representative on the University of Ibadan Consultancy Services (2004); Faculty of Arts Representative, Career Board of the University of Ibadan (2005); Member of the Faculty of Arts Appointment and Promotions Committee (2006-2009); Business Manager, ORITA, Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies (2005-2008); Assistant Warden of Queen Idia Hall (2008-2010); and Head

of Department of Religious Studies and Member of Senate of the University of Ibadan (October 1, 2010 – March 15, 2011) (Akintunde, 1997:1).

Internationally, Prof. Akintunde served as the Anglophone Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and Member of the Continental Executive Committee of the Circle (2002-2007). The Circle of Concerned African Women, is an interfaith institute as well as a community of African Women Theologians who come together to reflect on what it means to be women of faith within their experiences of religion, culture, politics and socio-economic structures in Africa. The “Circle” was organized by Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and inaugurated in 1989 in Accra in Ghana by 70 African women concerned about dearth of literature by African women (Akintunde, 1997:1). The “Circle” has as her mission statement “To undertake research and publish theological literatures written by African women with special focus on religion and culture ([www.thecirclecat.org](http://www.thecirclecat.org)). Mainly, “Circle” seeks to build the capacity of African women to actively work for social justice in their communities by sharing skills and insights with each other. A key discussion point is the complex relationship between gender, religion and culture and how to advance current knowledge by writing. Within the circle, records indicated that Dorcas Akintunde was a frontline member who inspired other members of the organization with her “calm spirit and very active leadership style as well as a crusading zeal” (Moyo, 2011). The Religious Studies Department in University of Ibadan and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians benefitted so much from Akintunde’s solid leadership as her wisdom and sharpness of her intellect took shape in the decisions and processes that took place in both settings where her administrative acumen was in full blossom (Ajayi, 2015:11).

### ***Her Family Life***

Prof. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde had a settled and happy marriage. According to Ajayi, her marriage life was part of the contributory factors for her exemplary life and career. Indeed, she might never have made the kind of mark she made on her times and in her career without the love, sweat, support and encouragement of her family (2015:12). Banke Amusan (now Akintunde) got married to her husband, Amos Olalere

Akintunde, in 1981 at a tender age of twenty. The couple were blessed with a settled family life for thirty years before her transition in March 2011. They were blessed with three children, two sons and a daughter. Dorcas Akintunde was a loving wife, mother and grandmother (Akintunde Amos, 2023). She was a family woman to the core. It is significant to remark that Mrs. Akintunde was not only occupied with making a career for herself, but also a living and an enduring legacy for the family she contributed to raising and nurturing. She was a good mother who reared successfully two biological sons and a daughter, and demonstrated in practical ways the importance of equal opportunities for both the male and female gender at home. She was a stern disciplinarian who taught her children the value of hard work. All the children have worked hard at their studies and have been prepared not only for education but for livelihood. The first child, Bayo, a male is now happily married too with two children. He has completed his PhD in the University of California, UC Davis. Currently, Bayo is working as a Research Scientist with the California Department of Public Health. He has worked on several research projects to eliminate tobacco-related disparities among priority populations in California. Bayo is passionate about reducing health disparities and is dedicated to working with racial and ethnic minority communities in the United States.

The second child, Toyin, a lady, who first obtained a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry, is now a registered nurse and currently works at the University of Yale Teaching Hospital, New Haven as an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse. She is also married and blessed with a boy and a girl. Kunle, the third child, a male, and a Master's degree holder from the University of Ibadan at the time of her transition is presently a banker. With such successful children, Banke can thus rest contented in her grave – for her children have imbibed her legacy of diligence, dedication and devotion to good effect.

According to her friend, confidant, counsellor and spouse for thirty years, Amos Olalere Akintunde, “One unique attribute of this woman was her uncommon ability to combine her academic pursuit with her rearing and nursing the children as well as keeping the challenges of the home front altogether, throughout the period of her career pursuit. The model of her life fixed into the biblical injunction (1 Peter 3:5) that beauty in her was seen in her trust in God and as fitted with her husband's plans



(Akintunde, Interview). Beyond her nuclear family, Banke Akintunde’s natural humility even for an academia of her caliber and distinction had an infectious quality among those who came in contact with her, up to the extended and social family levels (Ajayi, 2015:13).

She was a mother and “big sister” to her biological children, blood relations as well as many who came her way; they call her “mummy” or “auntie”. She took mothering and mentoring as a ministry, a call, a challenge, and a God-given responsibility. Her warmth was infectious amongst her biological as well as spiritual and academic children. All her children call her blessed (Akintunde, Interview). Indeed, her disposition is such that almost all young people that met her do not forget her as most of them make her one of their top role models. In addition, Dorcas Akintunde’s motherly disposition and love was extended to all her colleagues at work. She was always creating an atmosphere of peace even in times of turmoil. The outpouring of emotions and the glowing tributes from numerous quarters following her demise spoke so much about what her extended family and her associates feel about her.

An extract from a tribute by one of her younger colleagues and a close associate when the news of her demise was broken sums it all:

... You were always there for me; you were the big sister I never had; I could call you anytime of the day or night..., from you I learned the virtue called patience; now I say to myself, “who will calm me down when ‘my volcano decides to erupt?’ you always know the right words to say to me, you were an encourager, a source of inspiration (Labeodan, [www.thecirclecat.org](http://www.thecirclecat.org)).

In Ajayi’s language, she was to many a quintessential “Jewish Mama” – one with a Lydia ministry – always entertaining and/or counselling. The dedication of Dorcas Akintunde’s type is not found among many wives, mothers, sisters and even mentors who are academia. She was an inspiration to several people who were privileged to come her way (Ajayi, 2015:14).

## **Dorcas Akintunde and her Participation/Contributions to Local and International Projects on HIV/AIDS Discourse and Projects**

Prof. Dorcas Akintunde participated and contributed immensely to local and international projects on HIV and AIDS in Africa, Europe, America and Asia (Labeodan, [www.thecirclecat.org](http://www.thecirclecat.org)). In 2005/2006, record has it that she was invited by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on HIV and AIDS in collaboration with Yale University, New Haven, USA. While she was there, she started a project titled “An Assessment of the Potentials of Seven National Women Christian Groups at Preventing HIV and AIDS in Nigeria.” The project entails key informant interview and focus group discussion among those women groups.

The Yale University training and field experience was to facilitate her being requested to organize a day workshop for religious leaders in Nigeria on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, 2007. This was facilitated by the University of California and Harvard University. This project was titled “Nigerian Inter-faith Response to HIV and AIDS (NIHRA)” and it was inaugurated with twenty-five religious leaders from Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions (Ajayi, 2015:5). At that meeting, it was concluded that religious leaders had a role to play in giving spiritual and pastoral care to people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA). Also, it was made clear that religious leaders must also have knowledge of how the virus spread so that they can also sensitize the people as well as help to curb its spread. This is because the religious leaders are the closest to the people. Besides, it was observed that Nigerians like other Africans are religious; therefore, teachings and injunctions from the religious leaders are believed to be spiritual and will be more adhered to in most cases than from the political leaders (Ajayi, 2015:5).

In August 14-17, 2007, the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS in Africa, an arm of the World Council of Churches solicited Dorcas Akintunde to facilitate a training of trainers on HIV and AIDS in Nigeria. The training targeted teachers in Religious Studies departments and Theological institutions. 30 participants from the six geo-political zones of Nigeria attended the workshop, which aimed at mainstreaming HIV and AIDS into the curricular of theological institutions in Nigeria. Two persons living

with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) were invited to the meeting to create the awareness that people could be positive to the virus and still live positive lives. It was also to enlighten people that HIV only affects the immunity and not the humanity.

The success of the Training of Trainers Workshop in Nigeria enabled Dorcas Akintunde to be invited to participate in a similar exercise by the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS in Africa which held in Kenya in November 2007. Because of her active participation in the Kenyan Conference, she succeeded in attracting funds for organization of a day conference for church founders and leaders as well as youth leaders on HIV and AIDS prevention. Participants at the one-day conference were encouraged to be involved in pastoral and spiritual care and counselling for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and those affected by the virus.

Dorcas Akintunde had great experience in planning, conducting field-work and data gathering, data organization and data analysis in qualitative research in this secondary area of her research interest (Akintunde, 1997:1). When she was asked about what predisposed her to veer into this new field of study, in addition to her primary area of specialization, she remarked, “The rate at which HIV/AIDS have been ravaging Africa as a continent generally and Nigerian in particular has spurred my interest for research into what Faith-based organizations could do to stem the tide (Akintunde, 2008a).

According to Ajayi, through her scholarship in this extended area of research interest, Akintunde influenced many of her students and made substantial contributions to scholarship in that field. Actually, she designed a course “HIV and AIDS in Africa: The Church’s Response” which she taught at the post-graduate level in the Department of Religious Studies of University of Ibadan. She was even supervising the thesis of a doctoral candidate, Ruth Oke (now Dr.) on “Situating the Story of Hemorrhaging Women within the Context of Stigmatizing Experiences of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Ibadan. The project was ongoing by the time she transited to glory (Ajayi, 2015:6).

## **Akintunde and her New Testament and Feminist Theology: The Place of Women in Societal Development**

Dorcas Akintunde had a good and remarkable standing in the world of scholarship (Ajayi, 2015:4). Her intellectual engagement as a scholar was majorly in New Testament Studies with special interest in Feminist Theology. She wrote many books and contributed chapters in several other books. She also published several articles in academic journals as well as scholarly monographs. Her contributions to core areas of New Testament studies, Women Studies and Gender Issues are clearly evidenced in her publications and her services in advisory capacities on programmes and courses connected to these notable areas of specialization.

A balanced assessment of her scholarship would require some elaboration of these two interwoven areas. Majority of Akintunde's publications re-examines texts about women in order to re-interpret them. For instance, in her work titled "Decolonising Biblical Studies in Nigeria: Women's Perspective" she argues forcefully that Eve, rather than being the source of evil in the world brought knowledge and development into the world. To her, Eve's exploration brought about God's action of clothing them as well as Adam and Eve's opportunity of exploring new possibilities (Akintunde, 2005). Akintunde's contribution to the debate on roles of women brings to limelight new perspectives on such roles of women in the New Testament times as prophetesses, deaconesses, disciples as well as their roles in the expansion of Christianity.

These are foreshadowed in some of her publications, which include "The Achievements and Hurdles of the Good Women Association of Nigeria, 1943-2001" (Akintunde, 2002). "Healing of Simon Peter's Mother-in-Law, and Tabitha in the Context of Healing in the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria" (Akintunde, 2004a). "Women in Birth Narratives: Agents in Salvation History" (Akintunde, 2000). "Women in the ministry of Apostles: Emissary in the Spread of Christianity," (Akintunde, 2003a). "Jesus' Attitude to the 'Anointing Prostitute' (Luke 7:36-50): A Model for Contemporary African Churches" (Akintunde, 2006). "Spirituality and Development: An Overview of Christian Women Organizations in Nigerian Society" (Akintunde, 2004b). According to Ajayi, commenting on Akintunde's life and works, rider to the above is the fact that the various

roles played by some women in the Bible have further been compared with the roles being played by women living in patriarchal structure such as Nigeria. She argued that Biblical women are role models for contemporary women (Ajayi, 2015:8). For instance, Anna, who despite her being a widow played a prominent role in Jesus birth narratives, as illustrated in one of Akintunde's papers titled "Lucan Women in Jesus' Ministry. A Prototype for African Women" (Akintunde, 2003b).

Some other texts that are horrible, such as the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, have been interpreted by Akintunde in the light of some cultural and societal practices which violates womanhood in Africa in general and particularly in Nigeria. Some of these practices, she argues, violates the rights of women and should therefore be frowned at because they have exposed women to HIV and AIDS in some instances, while some are helpful in promoting the well-being of women. Some of the publications of Akintunde shed lights on this, examples are her publications titled "Dynamism in Culture and Values, Desirable Trend in Combating Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS: The Yoruba Experience" (Akintunde, 2004c); "Women as Healers: The Nigerian (Yoruba) Example" (Akintunde, 2008b).

## **Akintunde's Philosophical Propositions and Patriarchy in African Philosophy/ Gender Based Discrimination**

Overall, many of the publications of Akintunde made attempts to contextualize biblical teachings on women by relating the various interpretations to the situations of women in some of the mainline mission churches and in the African instituted churches, highlighting the differences in their treatment of women and how the African instituted churches have, to some extent, been influenced by African patriarchal cultural beliefs. Akintunde's scholarship is also geared towards finding solutions to the issue of discrimination against women in the church and generally in various African societies, advocating for a world where men and women exist and live together as equal creatures of God, with a common heritage in Jesus. The echo of her life and research was so loud on the vital roles played by women in Christ Apostolic Church, her own denomination, and other women in missions. This clearly is

placed in some of her publications titled “Partnership and the Exercise of Power in the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria” (Akintunde, 2003c). “Violence against Women: A Threat to the Nigerian Society” (Akintunde, 1999:122-133) and “National Rebirth and the Rights of Women: An Overview” (Akintunde, 2001:60-76).

In addition, employing the same critical exegetical tools of Biblical interpretation Dorcas Akintunde examined some Pauline texts which are always being used in support of the subordination and subjugation of women and she argued that the texts have been misinterpreted by male theologians. She thus made a case for re-reading and re-interpretation of such passages of the scriptures. One of such is the passage on Paul’s directive on submission of women. Akintunde argues that this was not referring to women in general, but that each woman is expected to submit to “her own husband” (Ajayi, 2015:7). She also argues that there are cases when women featured prominently in the leadership of the early church. She pointed to some women who were co-workers with Paul such as Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche, Tryphena and Tryphosa. She even called attention to the name of Priscilla being mentioned before her husband which is not a norm, at least, the man’s name is usually mentioned before the wife, as in “Mr. and Mrs.,” and not “Mrs. and Mr.” (Acts 18:18; Rom 18:4ff.).

## CONCLUSION

To many that knew Prof. Dorcas Adebanye Akintunde, she went back to her creator too soon as her burial programme read, “Gone too soon”. Obviously, being such a hardworking and meticulous person, she did not leave any “i” undotted; nor a “t” uncrossed. At her demise, there was a call for paper in her honour, which was published in 2015 and was titled *Women in Development: Essays in Memory of Prof. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde*. The book was edited by S. Ademola Ajayi and J. Kehinde Ayantayo. Borrowing the words of Ademola Ajayi, no doubt, the life and career of Professor Dorcas Akintunde is a whole book in living a worthy life and leaving an indelible legacy; with every phase being a chapter in

humility, and every point a page in modesty filled with statements of admonition and homilies (Ajayi, 2015:6). One can confidently say that Professor Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde's intellectual and work experience was so vast, diverse and comprehensive that a chapter in a book of this nature may not be able to capture all in full.

This chapter has merely succeeded to synthesize the interesting life and labour cum impact-making career of an astute intellectual, whose light shone brightly and who left a lasting legacy in the sand of time. This chapter does not claim to have done a full account of our matriarch, Dorcas Akintunde, all the same, the story of her life and career as encapsulated in this brief profile teaches lessons of perseverance, dogged determination, faith and confidence in one's persuasion. She was, in practical terms, a pride of the womenfolk in the academia. One, whose contributions to society at both the micro and macro levels was always directed by her realization of the historical importance of her mission and opportunity. We are confident that the memory of such a worthy and distinguished academia, administrator, mother to generation of her students, and a pioneer of noble causes in Nigeria, Africa and abroad will continue to be written in gold.

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## 10 | DOROTHY AKOTO'S CONTRIBUTION TO HEBREW BIBLE STUDIES

*Mark S. Aidoo*

### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses Dorothy BEA Akoto's theological contributions in the light of gender and women's liberation, from the perspective of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies. The study seeks to highlight the main strengths and contributions of her theology to the world of knowledge and liberation. It argues that Akoto's contextual reading has contributed immensely to knowledge in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and made a great impact on faith and women empowerment within the academic space. The task of the chapter is to explore how she develops a theology that embraces and empowers all genders to expose oppressive aspects in society. It also shows how her liberating interpretations affirm the dignity of life, a task that has been the focus of members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Exploring how Dorothy Akoto addresses patriarchy, colonialism, racism, tribalism, sexism, marginalization, and discrimination among other social factors would bring out her achievements, strengths, and weakness of her views on African theologies of liberation and Hebrew Studies in West Africa.

**Keywords:** Hebrew Bible, Women's Liberation, Ewe language, Folk proverbs, Hermeneutics, Culture

### **Introduction**

Women have made meaningful contributions to society despite patriarchal, sexist, classist, and social factors that mitigate against them. Many a time, women who rise above these challenges in the church, under the use and misuse of hierarchical theological perspectives and biblical interpretation, are not given the necessary recognition. That is why a con-

scious effort needs to be made to reflect on the exploits of women in theology, especially those who have made a great impact to remove the traditional interpretations and read the Bible in their rich enigmatic artistry.

This chapter highlights some of the works Reverend Professor Dorothy BEA Akoto<sup>1</sup> used to generate her theological ideas in Hebrew Bible studies and women's liberation, examines the uniqueness and main strengths of her theological discussions and their significance. It begins by looking at her life and achievements in the field of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies and as a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. It also establishes how her interpretations/theologies have generated an impact on faith and women's empowerment within the academic space. By exploring how she develops a theological voice that embraces and empowers all genders to expose oppressive aspects as well as offer liberating interpretations that affirm the dignity of life, this chapter highlights how she has contributed toward the theologies of liberation in Africa and the world.

## Biographical Sketch

The Rev. Prof. Dorothy BEA Akoto is a native of Avatime Biakpa and Anyako-Asadame in the Volta Region of Ghana. She is the fifth of a family of seven children. She is currently the Vice President of Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon (TTS), Accra for a second term, where she is an Associate Professor of Hebrew Language, Old Testament and Gender Studies. Before she was appointed as a Vice President, she served as the Academic Dean of TTS. She is therefore the "first female" to be appointed as the Academic Dean and the Vice President of Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon. She has also served as an Adjunct lecturer of the Hebrew Bible at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta/GA, USA, and a visiting Lecturer at McCormick Theological Seminary (MTS), Chicago/IL, USA. She is an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament through the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana (EPCG), and has been pastoring congregations since 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> She sometimes writes her name as Dorothy BEA Akoto-Abutiate or Dorothy BEA Akoto (nee Abutiate) or Dorothy Akoto.

Born to Christian parents, Dorothy Akoto grew up in the Christian faith. Her father was the late Rt Rev Andrew Kwami Alifo Abutiati, a minister of the gospel in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Ghana, and her mother was the late Mrs. Josephine Afi Abutiati-Adonu Wosordoe Attipoe. She lost her mother when she was 9 years old and thus grew up with her father. Due to her father's work as an itinerant minister, she attended three Basic/Primary Schools throughout Ghana: Evangelical Presbyterian Basic School at Avatime, Biakpa; John F. Kennedy Memorial Preparatory School, Accra; and Saint John's Preparatory School, Accra Nsawam Road. She had her secondary education at Mawuli School, Ho Volta Region. After her secondary education, she continued to the Institute of Education, Advanced Teacher Training College (ATTC) Winneba, and then to the University of Cape Coast for her first degree. She started her working life as a teacher and taught English Language and Literature. She worked with the Ghana Education Service (GES) in various schools and colleges including Accra Technical Training Centre (ATTC), Accra; Leklebi Secondary School, Leklebi/VR and E. P. Training College, Amedzofe/VR. While teaching under GES, she was an Examiner of the British-based Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and was among the pioneering Examiners in the process that transferred the RSA examinations to WAEC in Ghana in the early 1980s. She had also been an Examiner of the Middle School Leaving Certificate and Teacher Training College English Examinations of the WAEC for several years. She also served as a National Trainer of Teachers, training teachers of Primary, Middle, Junior Secondary schools and colleges on preparing and using Teaching/Learning Aids. She then moved on to work with Volta Regional Administration as an Executive Officer responding to the Volta Regional Minister. From there, she worked as a Telephonist, operating the Exchange Switchboard at the Volta Regional Administration connecting all the Ministries.

Dorothy Akoto then proceeded to do her graduate studies in the United States of America. She thus holds several Masters degrees, including a Master of Divinity (MDiv), from the ITC Atlanta/GA, USA; Master of Arts in Christian Education (MACE) from ITC, USA; Master of Theology (MTh) from Emory Candler School of Theology, Deca-

tur/GA, USA; and Master of Theology (MTh) from UNION-PSCE, Richmond/VA, USA. She had her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) studies in Hebrew Bible, Culture and Hermeneutics from Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago/IL, USA. Her area of specialization and research interests border on Wisdom Literature (especially, the Bible and African Proverbial Communication), Cultural, Postcolonial and Gender Studies.

The Rev. Prof. Akoto has been an Executive Committee member in several organisations. For example, she is with the ABH of SBL, West Africa Association of Theological Institutions (WAATI), Ghana Association of Biblical Exegetes (GHABES), Hokma House, Theta Phi International Honour Society, and World Association of Reformed Churches (WARC). She is a researcher, Christian Educator, Pastoral Counselor, Preacher, and Public Speaker, and has presented papers and held panel discussions at many Church and Academic platforms. She has been involved in Social Activism, HIV and AIDS advocacy as well as Women's/Leadership Conferences in various parts of Africa, America, Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

Akoto has authored some books and articles in books and academic Journals in Africa, the USA, and Europe. She has supervised and examined Dissertations/Theses and Project works. She is married to Rev. Dr. Johnny Atta Yao Akoto with four (4) biological children, and three (3) grandchildren.

## **Life with the CIRCLE**

Dorothy BEA Akoto got involved with the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) in the early to mid-1990s while studying for her Master's degrees in the USA. She met Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye at a Presbyterian Church, USA gathering in Louisville, Kentucky when she was mobilizing African women theologians to join the Circle. The discussions they had bordered on the challenges facing African women in theological education, domestic violence, racism, sexism, and other forms of dehumanizing "isms" affecting women were among the concerns Professor Oduyoye pursued. Aunty Mercy Oduyoye had formed The Circle and was encouraging African women to start writing articles for The Circle publications. After meeting with Aunty Mercy,

several other Circle Sisters also sent invitations to Rev. Akoto to this effect to contribute to the publications of The Circle.

Dorothy Akoto with self-motivation started looking at biblical interpretations that addressed various themes regarding issues of injustice in society and related similar issues in the patriarchally-biased stories in the Bible. So, when she was invited to work on some of the papers of The Circle, she focused on biblical interpretations. She wrote some papers and also edited some writings that made her more interested in scholarship. At the same time, she was involved in grassroots advocacy both in Ghana and abroad. Through Mercy Oduyoye's generosity and networking, she attended The Circle Conferences, interacted with other members, and also got her "hands dirty" by doing advocacy at the grassroots in several countries. She involved herself actively in the work of the Circle at the Talitha Cumi Centre for Women in Religion and Culture when she became a lecturer at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon in the early 2000s.

Dorothy Akoto has presented several conference papers on HIV and AIDS, Health and the Rights of Women and Children, Dehumanizing Cultural practices, Culture and Education, Widowhood rites, the place of Gender in Mission, Marriage of Minors, and Witch Camps, among others. She coedited the book, *Culture Practice and HIV and AIDS: African Women's Voice*, with Elizabeth Amoah and Dorcas Akintunde from the presentations at the third Pan-African Circle Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2002. The publication grapples with the issue of HIV and AIDS and how African women are disproportionately affected by the virus and therefore need holistic interventions that pay critical attention to the gendered perspective of religion and culture (Amoah, Akoto, and Akintunde, 2005). Since the mid-1990s, Dorothy Akoto has continued to work with Trinity Theological Seminary students to enmesh them into the ideals of feminist theology, and sociological, theological, and legal understandings of practical ministry. Akoto believes that great strides have been made in advocacy issues on the concerns of the Circle but more work needs to be done. She looks forward to a time when fe/males will have a "solid" place at all "tables for discussion" and activism locally, nationally, and internationally.

## Theological, Cultural and Religious Underpinnings

The interconnectedness between religion and culture has been a major motivation for Dorothy Akoto (2004:33-44). One cannot underestimate the distinct place of religion and culture in African interpretations and hermeneutics. Through such intersections, Africans have come to understand the links between HIV, gender, and religion. In fact, Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (2006:11) have averred that

... one of the primary defining features of African women's theologies is its focus on culture as a source of theology. Such focus is of course in continuity with African male theologians who also focus on culture as a way of redeeming African identity and culture which has often been demonised by an aggressive Christian missionary agenda to evangelise Africa.

In other words, culture plays a key role in the theological thinking of members of the Circle. Being aware that some have described African culture in a bad taste, the task is to recover the good aspects of African culture for growth and development.

Dorothy Akoto (2004) argues that theology in Africa should best be described as "African theologies" instead of African theology. To her, African theologies are a hybridized product of full-blown elements in the African cultural context and borrowings from the Western/Euro-American culture. From such a premise, she promotes African theologies as a "Hermeneutic of Grafting", a very unique contribution to Hebrew studies. It is a process where "the Western text and African cultural contextual elements are uniquely blended together with neither superseding nor condescending to the other" (Akoto, 2007:304). The hermeneutic of grafting, to Akoto, is useful when interpreting scripture from the socio-cultural conceptualisations of Africa since the multiple and multivalent voices always give room for multidimensional exegetical practice to make scripture meaningful to one's contexts. The concept of grafting has to do with the insertion of a scion upon a stock to become one plant or to unite a different species of plant stock on a different species of plant scion to form a graft.

Dorothy Akoto (2014) sees the cultural elements of the Bible, the Western world, and Africa metaphorically as trees. When cuttings from

the Western tree are grafted onto the African tree, for instance, they can produce blended flavours of both trees. The result will be that, there will be no pure-bred African or Euro-American interpretation/hermeneutics of the Bible/Word of God (i.e., *theo-logos*) but a hybrid that has a uniquely different taste than the fruits of each tree individually. Akoto (2014:23-24), however, says that the “encounter of the two trees of life assigns privilege to the African contextual imagery and recognizes that the fruit that emerges from the blending has a different flavour but it is still genuinely and fully African.” The hermeneutic of grafting, to her, is the work produced by interpreters who serve as intermediaries between the world of the Bible and the world of contemporary peoples. The intermediaries engage in the hermeneutics of grafting when they

... perform the duty of taking the people's requests to God and bringing God's responses back to them [that] can be likened to the multivalent/ pluralistic/polyphonic theologies/hermeneutics, which like the Biblical prophetic voices, have continued to characterize the interpretation/hearing of Scripture in various contexts including African contexts, where mythological and etiological stories come in handy (Akoto, 2007:294).

Hermeneutics of grafting, therefore, aims at weaving some new ideas on an old one. In that light, mutual co-operation and understanding arise from the interaction between the African cultural contexts and foreign ideas.

Generally, Dorothy Akoto emphasizes that African interpreters of the Bible should affirm and portray the rich cultural images and stick to them when doing Bible interpretation. Her goal is to show how an understanding of African cultures helps to elucidate the biblical text. Akoto (2011) argues that the pervasiveness of Ewe folk proverbs and wise sayings are rich theological resources. She rightly posits that Ghanaian proverbs and wise sayings are an indispensable part of normal conversation as they are inextricably bound to every form of communication. Their importance or indispensability shows in the indelible imprints they make on the minds of hearers in the process of every meaningful conversation (Akoto, 2011:41).

When Africans use proverbs in interpreting the Hebrew Bible, it helps in teaching some valuable lessons to all and sundry depending on the occasion. The use of proverbs in African societies is one of the most



elevated means of communication that can catch the attention of all, and can be used to fight sexist or gender-sensitive, classicist, or racially biased interpretations (Akoto, 2011:53). African proverbs cut across religious, moral and ethical boundaries, while at the same time speak to the hearts of the people. Akoto (2011:52) says that the “proverbs and wise sayings among Ewe people make proverbs the most fertile grounds upon which the message of the Bible can be planted, nurtured, and brought to fruition.” That is why she agrees that Ghanaian Ewe proverbs are substantially similar to canonical Proverbs and that of the ancient Near Eastern proverbs in that they call upon the people to hear, obey and transmit the moral lessons in them from one generation to the other, yet they differ in some extent (Akoto, 2011:42).

Dorothy Akoto (2011) believes in contextualization of scripture. She draws from the context of the Ewe to show how some images connect with biblical images. The convergence between the role of the mother and that of the firstborn daughter among the Ewes and that of the Good Shepherd recorded in the John 10 and Psalm 23 is an example. She explains that shepherding is not common among the Ewes, and as such a contextual reading will make the text real to the people. Among the Ewe, a mother is a homemaker, protector, custodian of law and order, an intermediary in traditional council, organizer, educator, public relation officer, doctor, nurse, and someone actively involved in community life. The firstborn daughter has to fulfil similar expectations. She concludes that unless the real-life situation, experiences, and stories of the Ewe people are taken seriously, there cannot be true liberation for the woman. Using foreign images recorded in the Bible will continue to make Africans see the Bible as very distant from their world (Akoto, 2011:263-265).

In her exposition on the *book of Esther*, Akoto (2010:268-272) argues that the message of the book of Esther addresses gender and power issues as well as existential issues of identity, survival, and cultural preservation of a minority living in Diaspora and thus have lasting relevance to African people. She related the Jewish festival of Purim, which marks a period of “relief/ rest” following victory over the oppressors to two annual festivals of the Ewe, ie *Glidzi* and *Hogbetsotso*. The message of the book of Esther teaches amicable coexistence amidst tension.

## Theological Advocacy

In her work, “Bible and Poverty-Reduction: A Feminist Gender-Sensitive Approach”, Akoto (2021:23-31) looks at the Sarah-Hagar story in Genesis 16 and 21 and the Elisha-widow’s story in 2 Kings 4:1-7 as mirroring the experiences of poor African women who are widows, put under forced slavery or abused. She argues that what appears more disturbing is that some of the injustices associated with poverty in the church and society are fanned by some interpretations that are given when reading the Bible, and that makes it difficult to achieve poverty reduction. By using a feminist gender-sensitive narrative approach, she discusses injustice and violence and how divine interventions can be of help. Hagar is likened to any woman in poverty who works for a “wealthy” mistress of high social standing that displays her authoritarianism, wickedness and lack of personal feeling for fellow human beings (Akoto, 2021:26). Although Hagar flees from Sarah, which probably compounded their plight and pushed them into abject poverty, the angelic visitation becomes a source of consolation for Hagar.

Similarly, Elisha’s intervention made the widow and her sons not taken into slavery for the rest of their lives was poverty reduction strategy (2 Kings 4:1-7). Again, the story highlights the evils of fear, slavery, deprivation, loss of a source of livelihood, displacement. and forced labour. Akoto explains that a typical characteristic of poverty shown in the story is that even though the poor has what is needed to be freed from poverty, they are ignorant about the value of what they have until they are given instructions by their “superiors” about what to do. Elisha had to give another set of instructions to the poor widow. For African women to achieve freedom, they will have to cultivate confidence in themselves and listen to advice. Akoto (2019:42) further says, the church should be intentional about the training of children, as Hebrew parents did for their children by using language and symbols that belong to the world of the understanding of children and which can be easily grasped by them.

Dorothy Akoto (2014:58) believes that “the issue of women’s health is multi-faceted and includes not only the physiological but also issues affecting the psychological, sociological and economic domains, among

others.” Like the woman in 2 Kings 4:1-7 who was emotionally and psychologically ill and poor and through a humanitarian act the prophet produced a miracle of the multiplication of oil to heal and liberate her, African women are devastated and suffering because of the death of others, economic woes, and dehumanization. They should be met at the point of their need (Akoto, 2021:35). African women are to be allowed to “participate actively in the healing process by being in solidarity with each other and by sharing power” (Akoto, 2014:67). Solidarity between women and men, women and the prophet of God, women and the neighbours can bring about the healing women desire.

Reading Genesis 24 as a prototype for marriage, Dorothy Akoto (2014:54) affirms that women like Rebecca can leave their father and mother and cleave to their husbands, in contradiction to the injunction in Genesis 2:18-24 where it is the man who leaves, and adds that “Rebekah is developed and portrayed as a woman in full control of her sexuality and resolute on her decision to go.” With the assurance of the providence of God, women can realize their destinies through faithfulness and willingness.

Dorothy Akoto (2006:98) is an advocate for the health of women. She says the Bible has enough resources to give hope in the hopeless situation in which HIV and AIDS pandemic has affected African women. She strangely sees the devastation caused by HIV and AIDS similar to the prophetic story of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14. To Akoto (2014:94-98), if the dry bones can live, there is a need for a prophetic word so that the hand, command, and Spirit of Yahweh can bring new energy into the life of African women. Akoto (2014:102-103) adds: “We are called upon in the face of the devastating HIV and AIDS, to become prophet-advocates for the down-trodden and abused. The call is for us to recognize that we deal with real people in particular locations, with their collective sense of his[her]stories and traditions.”

## **Significance of Dorothy Akoto’s theological propositions**

One significant point is how Dorothy Akoto asserts that there should rather be African theologies rather than African theology, an idea also held by Isabel Apawo Phiri (2004:152). The diversities and varieties of the African

socio-cultural context as well as the images that constitute real-life experiences in all parts of Africa promote the notion of theologies, yet there is a fine thread that weaves into all the theologies. No wonder Temba Mafico (2004:ix) attests that Dorothy Akoto's "rich African heritage served as a great asset in her interpretation of the biblical text." The diversity of women's experiences as well as the differences in race, culture, politics, economy, and religions within Africa make such theologies critical.

Again, Dorothy Akoto's strategy of comparing biblical proverbs with African folk proverbs is a great stride. Her perspective on the identity of motherhood or daughterhood in the Ewe traditions is evidence that the experiences of African women, young and old, have much to teach us when interpreting the Bible. The traditional heteronormative gender paradigm has been that men are heard and women should be silent. However, men cannot speak to the experiences of women in their pure raw form. Women need to speak for themselves.

However, a key weakness of Dorothy BEA Akoto's theological Hermeneutics of Grafting is how she develops the theoretical framework of her approach. Grafting as a horticultural technique is about joining parts from two or more plants so that they appear to grow as a single plant. The process is labour intensive and requires a great deal of skill. One needs to be sure what dominant characteristics are desired before the grafting is done. As such, not every rootstock can take a scion. What one sees in Dorothy Akoto's interpretation is over-reliance on the rich aspects of African proverbs and culture. One hardly finds the promotion of other Western cultural issues that need to blend with African ones. As such, there is a need to develop the approach well to show how one can go about using hermeneutics of grafting. Mercy Oduyoye (2004), however, is right in saying that not everything in African culture is useful for theologizing. Africans cannot blindly sanction every known culture but sift the good from the bad and retrieve what is retrievable. All cultures must be interrogated to know which aspects are life-giving to women.

Hulisani Ramantswana (2017) also observes some weaknesses in Akoto's hermeneutic of grafting. Although the approach is not a matter of Christianization of the African or African systems or different from adoption (inculturation) and adaptation (acculturation), it seeks to blend folk wisdom and the biblical message together by cutting parts of each

tree. According to Ramantswana (2017:364), she does not explain which branches from the African tree of life are cut and why. She “is not clear as to which Ghanaian folk proverbs would have to be cut off, and she does not provide the rationale for cutting them off. In my view, there can be no grafting without the cutting off.” He adds that Akoto’s approach does not clarify what would happen with those branches that are cut off from the African tree of life and that “the hermeneutics of grafting may lead to the process spiralling out of control as more and more branches are cut off from the African tree of life and shoots from the Biblical tree of life are grafted on” (2017:365).

African hermeneutics, for it to be familiar and speak to the hearts of Africans, should be critical of those issues that contradict the biblical truth while assessing the assumptions of readers (Mburu, 2019:212). Aidoo (2018) also argues that Africans place a high premium on wisdom, good public speech and superior rhetorical skills, akin to the prowess of the *okyeame* in Akan culture. If the voices of African interpreters can fall onto the hearts of the ordinary people in Africa, they should be clothed with rhetorical power. As such, the interpretation of Scriptures should not be done in the colloquial language of the past but in dynamic rich linguistic and interpretive insights from African experiences so that succeeding generations can appreciate the rich heritage of African people (Aidoo, 2018:106-107).

African women theologians within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to responding to challenges raised by HIV and AIDS in Africa and that is what Dorothy Akoto is doing. African women have pointed out clearly that the time that churches condemned those with HIV and AIDS is past and gone. Those times when the church thought that “sin” from sexual activity outside of a monogamous heterosexual marriage led to HIV-positive status or the consequence of bad behaviour is no more. The stigma attached to HIV cases deters persons from accessing help, getting tested or going through treatment. Hence the church cannot simply assume that by remaining silent, the stigma would go away. The fight against such a deep-rooted view, as Dorothy Akoto (2014:102) avers, is for all to rise up and criticize and dismantle the dominant consciousness,

myths, and ethical challenges to give way for systematic awakening. Mitzi J. Smith (2016:109) puts it clearly,

Women continue to be taught that they are to be good 'foot stools' for men. When a woman 'acts up' or refuses to be that footstool, a 'biblically' submissive woman, then she deserves any violence inflicted upon her. Too many women remain shackled to this type of thinking, and so they do all they can to be 'good girls,' always submissive to male authority and abuse.

Certainly, the church and religious groups have a duty to change the narrative. Teresa Okure (2009:412) also makes the point that "prejudice in all its forms kills and destroys the opportunities and talents God gives to individuals and communities in Africa and around the globe to improve themselves and to promote their growth in all spheres of life." Despite such perceptions, it needs to be noted that the church has contributed immensely to people's wellbeing and continues to do so in poverty reduction for women as well as men; building of hospitals and schools, providing food, shelter, and basic needs of many from which some renowned Africans have emerged.

Dorothy Akoto epitomises women who are themselves living sources of hope that resonates with an African ethos. It is said that someone who knows proverbs can sit to eat with elders. She is a role model to upcoming theologians. Africans are fast losing our traditions and those who are documenting them are making a great contribution. She is an African interpreter who speaks to the hearing of African people and to their hearts of Africans.

Women who are disenfranchised by socio-economic inequalities, social status, and poor health, need to be empowered to contribute to the wider society. The task is not to empower individual women but a collective whole, for Africans believe in communalism and one's person's identity is tied to the other – I am because we are. Individual healing is therefore incomplete without the total liberation of all women and men. This calls for solidarity, friendships, spiritual care, and conscious provisions of opportunities toward a holistic sustainable way of life. The church and religious groups may be making inroads through women like Dorothy Akoto, yet there is the need to embrace the challenges of transmitting

scholarship to the doorsteps of the world outside of the church that ought to hear the gospel. By so doing, the church will not only be impacting the lives of a few women within its fold but the whole of humanity so all will experience the liberating power that brings healing, restoration, forgiveness and wholeness, but will participate in the struggle and stand in solidarity with African women. Musa Dube (2005:177) gives an example of solidarity and how a biblical story can be an African women's story. Reading Rahab's story she sees herself like any other African woman as Rahab leaning on a small window, stuck in a world divided by a great wall that divides the powerful and the less powerful and where the powerful threaten to wipe out cities. As Mercy Oduyoye (2019:135) puts it, the way to becoming fully human should begin by standing with each other so that transformation of relationships, accountability, and participation in life can be achieved. Such has been the significant task of Dorothy Akoto in the study of Biblical studies and hermeneutics in Africa.

## CONCLUSION

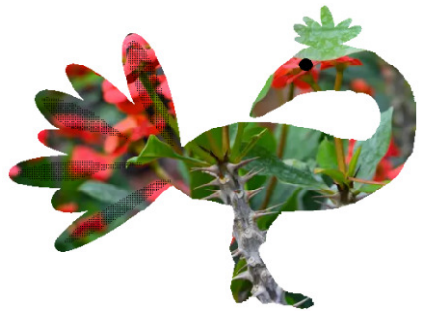
This chapter has demonstrated how Dorothy BEA Akoto, as a biblical scholar from Africa, has made an impact in biblical interpretation. It has highlighted her valuable snippets of knowledge and how she has been using African cultural paradigms to address the concerns of women. It has shown how as an African she has something to offer in the area of biblical hermeneutics, especially concerning the struggles of African women. It affirmed the role and authority of culture as curators and producers of knowledge. Dorothy Akoto has highlighted the stance on African theologies rather than African theology bearing in mind that there are diversities and varieties of African socio-cultural experiences, hence interpretations will be varied. Yet, one finds that there is a common thread that weaves into all the theologies. To be authentic interpreters, Africans need to take the good aspects of African culture that are cherished, and creatively use them to dialogue with the Bible. Again, African theologies cannot be exclusive from what is happening elsewhere in the world. Mutual co-operation and understanding should be an on-going process.

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## SECTION THREE

# **African Women Theologies of Liberation**



# 11 | A WOMANIST RETROSPECT OF MERCY AMBA EWUDZIWA ODUYOYE'S LIBERATION THEOLOGIES IN THE CIRCLE

*Seyram B. Amenyedzi*

## **Abstract**

The Matriarch Prof Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye remains a household name and a prophetic voice when it comes to African women theologians. Mercy grew up in a matrilineal-patriarchal Akan culture and later married into a patrilineal -patriarchal Yoruba culture. She was then a lone female ranger in theological education and faculty who also served with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Her overarching personal experiences, which represent that of many African women who were relegated to the background in almost every facet of life, compelled her to search and gather women in ministry and/ or theology to form the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle). The context was that which did not favor women politically, economically, socio-culturally, religiously, and theologically. For over three decades, the Circle remains a prophetic voice and a safe haven for female theologians who would have remained isolated due to patriarchal systems in our cultures and religious context. Aunty Mercy as affectionately called, did not limit her endeavors only to the 'assembly' but moved further to formulate liberation theologies, which offered a framework for confronting the patriarchal systems in theology, the church, the society and African Religion and cultures. Womanism approaches feminism from an Afrocentric premise with the assertion that not all feminist experiences are the same and that of the African woman is unique, hence, the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm is engaged in this chapter to reflect on Oduyoye's liberation theologies then and now.

**Keywords:** Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Liberation Theologies, Womanism, African Women Theology, Church, African Cultures, African Religion

## Introduction

Admittedly, any work on Professor Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye is both a pleasant and a daunting task as there are several essays, thesis, and books in her honor (Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Gathogo, 2010; Landman, n.d.; Oredein, 2016; Siwila & Kobo, 2021). Mercy Oduyoye's background of matrilineal-patriarchal Akan culture and later a patrilineal -patriarchal Yoruba culture, her position as a Deputy General Secretary at the World Council of Churches (WCC), her involvement and presidency at the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and a pace-setter as a woman theologian influenced her formulation of liberation theologies. She has been recognized as the mother of African women theologians and the founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Oduyoye, 1986; 1990; 1995; 2022; Baloyi, 2022; Kwok, 2004; Landman, n.d.; Oredein, 2016).

Despite the many interrogations, criticisms, critique, rewriting and reflections on her liberation theologies, I deem it a privilege to also write about such a Matriarch; more so, as a Ghanaian female theologian, it is an utmost pleasure. A retrospection is basically reflecting on her work in the then and now, her works have existed for over decades, this chapter serves as a rereading and rewriting a summary of Oduyoye's liberation theologies. The chapter engages the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm which aids in posing some relevant contextual questions amidst reflections.

## Methodology: The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm

Although Oduyoye's liberation theologies have been approached from a feminist perspective for decades, I argue that her approach leans more towards womanism, and womanist theology given that she asserts that the experiences of African women are not the same as compared to that of our sisters in the West. This is not to downplay the observation made by Phiri & Nadar (2006) that the realities of African American women from where womanism originate are different from that of African women in Africa. There is still the contention on whether the Circle theology is feminist or womanist, however, the bottom line is that we embrace and affirm theologies that are focused on the African women's oppression, exclusion, subjugation and the injustices towards the full

value and participation in the religious and cultural contexts and the society at large.

Oduyoye's position at the WCC compelled her to look at the broader feminist picture, however this never prevented her from making the unique case for African women. It buttresses Alice Walker (1983), the propounder of womanism's premise that "Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender". Womanist theology focuses on theology, ethos and praxis that center on the experiences of African women dealing with issues of culture, race, classism and sexism in the church and society (cf. Thomas, 1998; Floyd-Thomas, 2010; Gafney, 2017). It is in this light that the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm is deemed fit for reflections on an African Woman's liberation theologies. The Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm is a combination of two conceptual frameworks: Afrocentrism and womanism to form a paradigm that poses specific contextual questions in doing African women research (Amenyedzi, 2022).

First of all, it is worthy to note that Afrocentric research method proposes that African research is done by African people from an African lens within an African culture; which will enable us tell our real stories instead of those told from Eurocentric perspectives which do not reflect our realities (Asante, 1987, 1988; Mazama, 2001; Mkabela, 2005; Amenyedzi, 2022). A Narrative from an interview conducted with Mercy her by Oluwatomisin Oredein is also featured in her own voice. Below are questions posed in the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm (Amenyedzi, 2022) and a matrix which will guide a reflexive reflection on Oduyoye's theologies.

1. What is the African context?
2. What are the essential components of the culture?
3. What is the theological/religious view of the woman in this context?
4. How are women appreciated in the context?
5. How does the situation in question affect the African woman?
6. What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how would that influence the appreciation of the African woman?  
(The focus is on both Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and/or reformed/reformulated praxis)

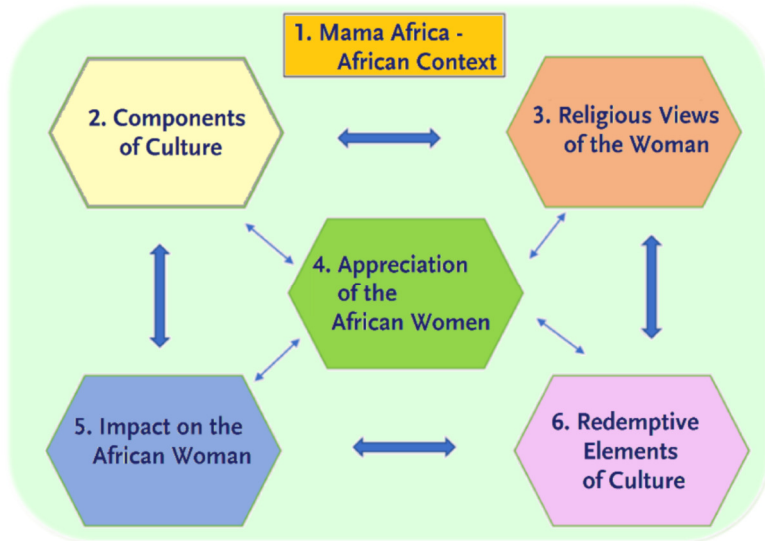


Figure 1: *The Afrocentric-Womanist Matrix*<sup>1</sup>

The Afrocentric-Womanist Matrix shows a relationship between the various phases of the paradigm, none stands alone, however a careful interrogation of each aspect as indicated in the matrix helps in delving deeper into various aspects that could be overlooked without employing the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. Hence, the focus will be on the religious, cultural, and social context in Africa regarding women as indicated as Mama Africa in the matrix. The components of culture will focus on those aspects of culture that Oduyoye highlights in her liberation theologies. I further look at how women have been appreciated or not in the church in particular and what redemptive elements in both their culture and Christianity are relevant for the recognition of the value, dignity and

<sup>1</sup> The Afrocentric-Womanist Matrix is used with permission, was first published in Amenyedzi SB (2022). *The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm*. In S. Chirongoma & V.S.W. Kiilu (Eds.), *Mother Earth, Mother Africa: World Religions and Environmental Imagination* (pp. 199-214). African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.52779/9781998951130/11>.

inclusion of women in the society at large, in the church and in leadership in particular. The following sections elaborate on the various phases of the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm as shown in the diagram in a retrospection of Oduyoye's liberation theologies.

### **An African Woman Theologian: Prof Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye**

The first phase of the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm establishes the context of the study. Here, the focus will be on the African religious context and Mercy Oduyoye herself. A brief biography helps us locate the chapter in the appropriate context. Auntie Mercy is from the Akan tribe of Ghana, a daughter of a Methodist minister Charles Kwaw Yamoah and Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah, born on her grandfather's cocoa farm in October 1933. The mother's lineage is originally from Amakom near Kumasi but, migrated to Akyem and finally settled in Asamankese in the Eastern Region while her patrilineage is from Apam and Ekwamkrom in the Central Region. She is a royal from the paternal line. Mercy had a firsthand experience of stranding beads which was her grandmother's profession, an experience that shaped her theology a great deal and reflected in her famous book *Beads and Strands: Reflections of An African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Oduyoye, 2002; Russell, 2006; Amoah, 2006; Oredein, 2016).

Oduyoye's secondary education was at the Achimota school, a prestigious school up to date. She then continued to the Teacher's Training College in Kumasi, now the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. She practiced as a teacher while she self-tutored herself to write the Advanced Level examination which led her to the University of Ghana where she studied theology. She had an opportunity to also study at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom on a staff development program. Her academic career ranged from teaching at the girls' high schools and universities both in Ghana and Nigeria and then to the ends of the world, also, through her presentations and publications. She has been awarded several Doctor of Theology/Divinity *Honoris Causa* by renowned universities in Africa and beyond. Her position as the Deputy General Secretary at the WCC, her involvement in the youth department



of the WCC and her positions at EATWOT all shaped her theologies. As a lone ranger female theologian on the global platform amongst men, and a pacesetter in feminists/womanist theologies, her significant contributions to African theology and liberation theologies in general cannot be overemphasized. Her relentless efforts led to the birth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle). She has been accorded a lot of accolades and censure as a wise woman theologian, mother of African feminist theology, misfit, a troublemaker and many more (Oduyoye, 2002; Russell, 2006; Amoah, 2006; Oredein, 2016). The paradoxes surrounding her life, I can safely say she might be perceived at some point as an enigma especially when men could not comprehend why she was doing theology coupled by questions like “what is she doing here?” (Oredein, 2016:158)

Then, when Oduyoye began formulating her liberation theologies, the context was mostly patriarchal that had somehow entrenched the subjugation of women as inferior in the society at large, in the socio-cultural, economic, political, and most relevant to her works, the religious contexts. Oduyoye’s emphasis has been on the enormous contribution to the sustenance of the family, and society, yet unappreciated beyond the roles of wifehood and motherhood despite the significant roles women play especially in matrilineal cultures like the Akan tribe of Ghana where she hails from (Oduyoye, 1986; 1990; 1995; 2022). I avow that even though there has been significant progress in the church and society regarding women issues, there are still grey, thin and thick areas that are not yet resolved such as women leadership in certain denominations. Some cultural practices that do not favor women still linger.

## **Religion, Culture and Womanhood in Africa**

The second phase of the paradigm asks: what are the essential components of the culture? What it means to be a woman in Africa is featured in this regard. Mama Mercy’s own experiences of growing up in a matrilineal-patriarchal socio-cultural context in Ghana vis-à-vis that of her matrimonial context, a patrilineal patriarchal context in Nigeria gave her a firsthand experience with the African cultures she writes about. It has been indicated that, her approach has been both soft and firm (Phiri &

Nadar, 2006). Kwok (2004) maintains that her approach is a cultural hermeneutic and although she is not explicit in using postcolonial theories, she has a postcolonial approach.

She identified paradoxes and ironies in both cultures which also reflect in other African cultures about the worthy contribution of women to the survival of the family and society yet normally trivialized and delimited to servitude and procreation. She aligns motherhood to poverty in the sense that women (mothers) give their all to the sustenance of the family until they have nothing to give except their poverty yet unacknowledged, moreover, she is expected to depend on the man for survival (Oduyoye, 1985; 1995; 2002; Kanyoro, 2006; Russell, 2006; Amoah, 2006). The interesting observation Oduyoye made then was in the wake of global liberation fights and activism mainly on racial grounds, and later gender related. African men had deceived themselves that there was no problem that needed to be addressed regarding women liberation. Feminism was perceived as foreign and those who toed that line were deviants. Little did they know that the African woman needed a voice but was silenced. Thankfully, African women found a voice in Aunty Mercy who was indeed a misfit and later in many others (Oduyoye, 1985; 1990; 1995; 2002).

Oduyoye picked up the issue of African women's impoverishment which was usually ignored until they had to find their own voice. Their bodies have been used for experimenting drugs; women are usually excluded from economic and political decisions that affect them, for instance though women farm lands, they do not have a say in ownership in most cases. There are taboos in most cultures that affect their health and wellbeing. African women cannot claim to belong to the category of under employed because they work over 40 hours a week but unpaid as their labor remains undocumented. Christianity, Islam, Western cultures, and androcentric ideologies all contribute to the impoverishment of women in Africa (Oduyoye, 2002).

She asserts that, in Africa, the idea of a free woman is unwelcomed, a woman must be attached to a man, a father, a husband or an uncle to be respected or dignified. It is problematic for a woman to remain single, even a successful woman who is single equally experiences stigmatization. Another most important matter of concern has been on rituals;

there are several rituals at various stages of life from birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, widowhood, and death. While as Africans, rituals are significant both for male and female, it is prudent that dehumanizing rites are abolished or redeemed to ensure the dignity and value of especially women who suffer most in such instances (Oduyoye, 2002).

Oduyoye's assertion of the influence of Christianity and Islam on African culture cannot be overemphasized, mostly in the negative sense where these religions are perceived to be superior hence taking away those importance values that depicts our true identity. It is important to note that recent theological discourse on the continent and beyond emphasizes contextualization and inculturation in doing theology and missions, perhaps her voice and that of other African theologians are breaking through.

## Oduyoye on Liberation and Theology in Africa

Phase three of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm focuses on the theological/religious views of the African woman. This section highlights the theologies of an African woman theologian. Mercy Oduyoye is an African woman theologian, as a theologian, she addresses general theological issues and then as a woman she concentrates on those theologies that are liberating to women in general and African women in particular. Broadly, she highlights issues of African religion, being an African and Christian, colonialism and Christianity, salvation, culture, gender, discrimination, oppression, peace and justice and most significantly approaching these theologies from a feminist/womanist dimension. Oduyoye has since time immemorial proposed that the spiritual and secular must be held together when theologizing, which is the point of departure for Public Theology. Perhaps, she must be also recognized as a mother of African public theology (cf. Oduyoye, 1986; 1995; 2002; Agang, Forster & Hendriks, 2020).

In defining **theology**, this is what she has to say: “suffice it to say that Christian theology is done wherever people reflect on their situation in the context of the gospel. Hence various expressions of Christian theology are sometimes referred to as contextual theology” (Oduyoye, 1986:2).

This is to say she leans towards contextual, lived, living and public theologies if we should name what she does. Oduyoye acknowledges the significance of Third World theologies and black theology in South Africa in the liberating theological discourse. She maintains that in doing theology in Africa, the African context must be taken into consideration while determining the methods of engagement. However, she indicated that this did not mean Western methods and frameworks were going to disappear just like that. Mercy Oduyoye is of the opinion that the fight for freedom from colonization birthed liberation theologies in Africa (Oduyoye, 1986; 2002). In fact, African theology though has gone a long way, we still grapple with Eurocentric approaches, theories and theologies laying at the center of seminaries in Africa. This is not to say there have not been any progress, the Circle just as Auntie Mercy dreamed of, has enormously contributed to framing feminist and womanist theologies.

The other most important term is “**liberation**”, as used here presupposes the existing of an unjustifiable situation that has to be eliminated. All limitations to the fullness of life envisaged in the Christ-event ought to be completely uprooted. Jesus came that we might have life and have a more abundantly” (Oduyoye, 2022:68-69). To Oduyoye (1986; 2002), creation itself is liberation, when God created the universe, it was delivered from chaos, created out of pain indicating the nature of God who brings meaning into chaotic situations. Also, the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt portrays a God who delivers His people from oppression and struggles. The creation, exodus, and the sending of Christ into the world show a God of redemption. God the owner of the world is in charge and expects us to respond to Him rightfully otherwise it becomes sin not to even recognize His presence and His work among us. She narrates:

From this perspective we hear the narrator telling of the existing disharmonies of our world: disharmony in nature, caused by human excesses and irresponsibility (Gen 3,4,6). To tell this tale of woe, the narrator begins with a scene in which God is “absent” (Gen 3:1-7). The woman talks about God with a Serpent (the opponent of God); the man stands by not taking part in this God-talk (theological disputation) but also completely forgetful of his responsibility to God who had commanded that the fruits of that tree was not to be eaten... but knowing the law does not necessitate obedience. (Oduyoye, 1986:93)

God's redeeming presence and love are evident at this point, then in the exodus and then in sending Jesus Christ to save us. In the nutshell, she sees **creation as liberation, the exodus as liberation and the Salvation of Jesus similarly as liberation**. In this sense, to the African Christian what liberation or redemption from oppression means is relevant in our theologies. Redemption not only from colonialism and the oppressor's rule but also from dominant oppressors in our cultural and religious context who subjugate marginalized people such as women. To her, **patriarchy is sin needing redemption from the oppressors**. Some of the major questions she poses are: What are the implications of Jesus's death in African cultures and religions, African religion, Christianity and Islam? Salvation brings deliverance from both spiritual and physical struggles. Embedded in salvation is reconciliation leading to peace and justice. Yahweh is a warrior who crushes the oppressor to win victory and liberty for His people (Oduyoye, 1986; 1995; 2002).

To Oduyoye (1986; 2002), the Christ of Christianity is concerned about every human need which explains the quest for humanity for salvation. Therefore, the willingness of Africans to accept salvation through Jesus Christ is a journey towards liberation from slavery as in Egypt, oppressions, dehumanization and injustice. Another thing she emphasizes in her theology is covenant and community whereby God is a god of covenant. God had a covenant with children, he had covenant with Adam and Eve and with the Israelites and in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. This is relevant to Africans as we are a people of covenant especially blood covenant at many levels expressed in different forms, rituals, and ceremonies.

**Neighborhood and neighborliness** also feature prominently in her theologizing, these are vital in a community. It is important to ask the question: who is my neighbor? The neighbor is not just one next door in that there are several levels of relationships where neighbors are encountered, among nations, race, ethnic groups and more. Even unacknowledged neighbors are still neighbors and Jesus said when we are kind to our neighbors, if we love our neighbors as ourselves and if we care for the needy then we have done it for Him that is the essence of neighborhood and neighborliness (Oduyoye, 1986; 2002). It is also worthy to note that Auntie Mercy has for decades mentioned **ecological issues** which is

now a significant theological discourse in the Circle (cf. Chirongoma & Kiilu, 2022). Oduyoye (2002) is of the opinion that in God's economy when he created the world, everything was good and sustainable and codependent. The problem is when there was exploitation, and when women are not seen as image barriers of God, co-creators with God and co-managers of God's economy. The next section elaborates on her feminist/womanist theologies.

### **Oduyoye on Liberating Women Theology, Ethos and Praxis**

The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm then proposes an interrogation of how women are appreciated in the context. Now, the focus will be on Oduyoye's feminist/womanist theologies. This is how she describes what she does in an interview:

**Oluwatomisin:** I've seen in your work that you identify as an African women's theologian. I've also seen in your work that you identify as an African feminist. What does it mean to be an African women's theologian? How would you describe your brand of theology?

**Mercy:** Ok, we—I'm saying "we" because by the time I got on the open market as it were—there were more of us. I was the one that decided that we would call ourselves African women theologians. Because that's the simplest—we are Africans, we are women, and we are theologians. We were kind of off-line people. We were a minority. People were wondering "What are they doing here?" So, we wanted to state clearly that we are women, African, we are theologians. I didn't have any of these nice words like womanist and feminist to go on. And also it was important for us to identify ourselves as women, because the theologians in Africa – and now I'm talking the seventies, sixties to seventies – they were all men. So, we have to underline the women when we talk about African women theologians (Oredein, 2016:158).

Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, prominent members of the Circle call Oduyoye's method as "Treading Softly but Firmly" where she makes her strong case for women but has adopted gentle and wise ways of sending her message across to enable good audience (Phiri & Nadar, 2006). I have argued early on that her work leans more towards womanist theology.

In 1985 and 1988, the WCC launched a decade for women and this was for the council to focus on women issues for the next decade also based on the then UN declaration in 1979 to end all forms of discrimination against women. The UN conference in Nairobi in 1985 sparked the fire which led to the WCC decade in solidarity with women. This was a call in solidarity with women in identifying the sinful act of discrimination and being deliberate an intentional about the inclusion of women in the ministry and praxis of the churches. The yellow book became the blueprint for the WCC internationally (Oduyoye, 1990). In her book *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? the Ecumenical decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, she shares her passion on the need for the global church to stop the sin of discrimination against women while reporting and mapping up WCC's decade for churches in solidarity with women (Oduyoye, 1990). She indicates:

Since it is the church I specifically want to call to task, I am broadly defining church as an organization for performing Christ-like functions in the world. I want to examine the church's attitude to the growth of women into Christ-like persons. I speak broadly, then, of Christianity and Christian churches (Oduyoye, 2002:69).

In addressing the sin of discrimination of women in the church as she normally puts it, she identifies that the starting point is to affirm the full humanity of the woman who is equally created in the *imago Dei* and no less a human being. She stressed on the patriarchal systems in the society at large, African cultures and religion, which are also replicated in the church. Biblically, the exodus account reflects a people in oppression who were saved by God. In the process there were women (midwives) who refused to join in the oppressor's rule and schemes. They feared God so they would not kill the babies of the Israelites as commanded to do. Jochebed the mother and Miriam her daughter found a way to keep Moses alive. Then Pharaoh's daughter who defied the father's orders to kill the Hebrew boys by saving one, and bringing him right into the palace (Oduyoye, 2002).

Moses emerged from the efforts of the aforementioned women called by God to deliver His people from oppression. It is important to note that aside Pharaoh, were the task masters who were 'accredited leaders' of the children of Israel and the Israelites who turned against Moses. Liberation

does not happen in a vacuum, God uses men and women alike in the process. It is also possible to mistake the desert for the promised land. The God-factor must be recognized in the fight for liberation otherwise, it becomes problematic. Oduyoye sees oppression as communal sin which also happens in the church and contends that *Gye nyame* (except God) meaning without God nothing holds. We need God and God-Talk to address the oppression and subjugation of women in the church and the society at large. A major issue regarding women in the church is leadership and ordination (Oduyoye, 2022).

Although the feminine aspect of God has been overlooked, it cannot continually be ignored. The gender of God is not the issue of contention here but the nature and his expression is what we focus on in this regard. In Africa, God has been described as a fatherly mother or a mother father. God is portrayed as a parent, mother or grandfather however, in theological circles, male theologians construct God as a male, who had male priests, with a son who has male disciples who became the apostles. There seem to be no room for woman leadership in the church and society. It must not be forgotten that women played a major role in the exodus as mentioned above and the resurrection message was entrusted to women who were sent to convey the message to the disciples (Oduyoye, 1990; 2002).

## **The Plight of Women in the Church in Africa**

In phase five of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm, the quest is to ascertain how women are affected by the situation in question. Oduyoye identifies the effects of patriarchal notions in the society, culture, African Religion, and the church on African women. Christianity reinforces culture to promote sexism in the church. The impact of colonization and westernization on the subjugation of women cannot also be underrated as the women are to remain silent while they obey, submit and follow prescribed values without question. Then she made a case that female voices were ignored in theologizing, however, thankfully the Circle has granted a prophetic voice to African women theologians who are on top of issues in the church and society. This does not mean that sexism is over but at least there is some God-Talk going on (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992).



Even the church fathers like Augustine of Hippo, and the great reformer Martin Luther did not favor women in their theologies, rendering women as inferior. The biological nature of women has been used to discriminate against them. In most African initiated churches, women are not allowed entry to the place of worship during menstruation, after delivery and sexual intercourse, the head cover is another contention. Who defines the humanness of a woman is vital in this conversation. If it is God. Then we must all embrace who God has made us all to be, both men and women, in His image. Sexuality seem to be a taboo to discuss in the church, moreover this is a lived experience that cannot be separated from the woman. She proposes that understanding the sexuality of both men and women will enhance relationships in the church, devoid of hierarchical and power systems (Oduyoye, 1997; 2002).

### **Redeeming the Identity of the African Woman in the Church and Society**

The final stage of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm seeks for the redemptive elements of cultural and religious context and how that would influence the appreciation of the African woman. Oduyoye is passionate about the recognition and affirmation of the oppression and subjugation of women as sin. It is then that need for redemption will be acknowledged as sacred with God lying at the center 'Except God' intervenes. This means that women will be valued as image bearers of God and co-managers of God's economy beyond their roles in the kitchen and biological role of procreation. The women who had been with Jesus on the resurrection morning wandered and spoke about who would roll the stone for them to be able to minister to Jesus. The stone, the obstacle was already rolled away when they got there, and the most important message of the resurrection was entrusted to women to even tell the Apostles. The stone is rolled away hence the church in Africa must rise up to this knowledge and allow women to freely partake and respond to their call (Oduyoye, 1990).

In calling the church to account, there is continuous discrimination against women both from the pulpit and the patriarchal structures. Mercy criticizes and challenges the African Church to redeem Christianity from the image as a force that pushes women into accepting rules that hamper the free and full expression of their humanity as it has to do with class, race, and gender. The exclusion from performing rituals and priesthood based on the image of God as a male and leadership as the prerogative of men has blinded the church from noticing the absence or presence of women. Hebrew scripture and culture have been used to discriminate disproportionately against women in the church. Matriarchal cultures, and certain significant roles in African cultures and Religion such as that of the queen mother in Ghana who even has power over the king and priestesses at the shrines who minister to men should give a clue to using culture as an intervention in redeeming the image of women (Oduyoye, 1986; 1990; 2002).

The God that is preached in Africa is portrayed as one that has ordered the oppression of women so they must obey and submit without question. On the contrary, many African women experience God differently and cannot be subjugated since we have found freedom in God in Christ who empowers spiritually which must be expressed in many ways. The Christology we must embrace as African women is one that uphold Jesus as our loving liberator from oppression (Oduyoye, 1997).

The call is for the church to join in solidarity with women to redeem the image of the woman, the theology, praxes and ethos of the church and culture. There are various levels of redemption that need to be considered. Solidarity does not always mean the will of God as in the case of Adam and Eve and the Tower of Babel accounts in the Bible. Solidarity is when all people join together with God to end oppression just like the midwives in Egypt although they were not directly affected. Men and women must equally join in the God-talk to bring redemption to women (Oduyoye, 1990; 2002). Cultural rituals and religious tradition that dehumanize women must be likewise redeemed.

## CONCLUSION

The chapter was a retrospection on Professor Mercy Oduyoye's liberation theologies through an Afrocentric-Womanist lens. As an African woman theologian myself and a minister, her experiences and theologies mirror my own experiences. We as African women are grateful for the many voices that have risen from the Circle on many issues that confront us as women in the religious and cultural contexts. We are also grateful for the men and churches who through the efforts of the WCC decade for women pledged their solidarity to end oppression. Despite this progress, I can still say that African women still encounter discrimination, subjugation, and inhumane rituals from the cultures and religions. Mercy Oduyoye has been a prophetic voice and remains so for African women in general and African women theologians. She keeps echoing **the stone is rolled away; Talitha Qumi: Damsel Arise** (Oduyoye, 1990; Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992).

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## 12 | **SR ROSEMARY EDET NKOYO: SHIFTING NEW THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS FOR WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN SOCIETY AND AFRICAN CHURCH**

*Estelle M. Sogbou*

### **Abstract**

The Catholic co-founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Sr. Rosemary Edet HHJC could be seen as one of the first African Catholic Feminist Nuns. As a biblical theologian she articulates African tradition(s) and biblical interpretations. Edet has developed a theology of inculturation which tries to give back women's place to them, especially African women, within Christianity and the traditional Nigerian culture(s). Her two main concerns were: how can African women regain a new understanding of their role, dignity and place in the Church and Society after colonization; and the first evangelization in most West African countries. This is because these two events have reenforced the patriarchal pattern that already shaped some or most African traditional societies. Edet's perspectives and responses based on a constructive dialogue between the Bible and the Nigerian (traditional and modern) cultures, elaborate a new standard for women through an interpretation of the concept of community which gives a new insight of the domestic ritual and daily women's life as a locus theologicus. She advocates for a positive and authentic place of the women in the traditional settings, which could help to define the place and the role of women in the Church. She thus opens a path for other women in African feminist liberation theology. Using her publications as a basis, this chapter will present her theological journey about the liberation of the Nigerian women by shifting this liberation theology and its reception and how these echoes by her contemporaneous colleague Elisabeth Moltmann.

### **Prologue**

Rosemary Edet (1988:3) writes that "the situation of women and the nature of Christianity in Africa are both shaped by histories and culture that are molding contemporary Africa." This statement expresses her concern

as an African woman theologian: how the Evangel could transform society and the Church and let the liberation be a reality for all, particularly for Women?

Holding her charges in her community, Edet did not stop her work as an academic and researcher. In fact, she was very consistent in her ways, a consistent Religious and a consistent academic. As a researcher she remained committed to her work as a teacher. Her commitment led her to question the role of women in the Church as a catholic nun also just as women in the society.

Edet chose to find the answer through the analysis of the traditional Nigerian society and the study of the scripture. In fact, born and raised in a traditional family (Udoidem, 2011), she knew from the interior the Church, society and how the challenges could be like. She proposed a new paradigm of community that could help to see women as a full part of the church and society. Actually, Sr Rosemary did her doctoral studies in Religious Studies with a dissertation on *The Resilience of Religious Tradition in the Drama of Wole Soyinka and James Ene Henshaw*. Her studies of the religious traditions in the New Testament seem to have preoccupied her as a New Testament scholar at the University of Calabar. Among the themes in New Testament studies, one of those that concerned her most was the Pauline notion of community (Udoidem, 2011).

Enhanced with the most accessible and available of her publications,<sup>1</sup> our contribution will describe the context that shaped the reflections of Edet and how this opened the path echoed in the feminist liberation theology.

## Doing Theology in Nigeria: Challenges and Chances

In the late 60s the Roman Catholic Church began a huge worldwide reform through the Vatican II. It started a long movement that lasts till today. This new understanding of the Church had opened a path for a

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<sup>1</sup> During her life, Sr Rosemary published a few articles in the beginning of the Circle and the EATWOT. Unfortunately, the publication in Nigeria didn't get a good audience which made an access to her works and her legacy very difficult.

reflection about new roles and new challenges for African women, particularly the Nigerians. This Reform took place during the earlier independence time of most African countries. Hence, the building of free society after years of colonisation also brings with it many challenges. One question is how to find a new relation with traditional culture? How would it be possible to articulate Christianity and traditional praxis of the culture? How could women find their place in this new situation of the Church?

These are the leading questions of Edet in this new social and church context. So, the first step is to understand what this context is.

### ***The women in traditional Cultural and Socio-Political Context of Nigeria***

Like most of the African countries in the first years after independence, Nigeria was under military government in a political environment frame by ethnical identities. All these groups work to maintain the privileges and the rights due to their identity. Even if the colonization was over, Africa remained in a new form of slavery and colonization in their native country. Beside this one, the traditional context was reinforcing the colonization that frame a particular place for the women.

The Nigerian traditional society could be described as a patriarchal one. In this context, women receive their identities and roles only as wife and mother but not as a person of their own. The strength bond between women and their men and children becomes a chain for the women. The patriarchal organisation gives no place and no chance to the woman, Edet wrote:

In most Africa women are still the property of the men who father them or marry them. In some societies it is the uncle who holds sway over a woman's life. It makes little difference. Any talk of women's liberation is met with cynicism, hostility, or ridicule. A woman who has a vision concerning her life that contradict the traditional role the male-dominate society has laid down for her pays a terrible price for daring to pursue that vision (Edet, 1998:6).

This statement makes obvious how the position of women is under an oppressive structure that does not favour their freedom and empowerment. Unfortunately, this structure of the traditional society is also found in the Church even if the things are bringing on a change.



### ***The Post-Council-Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria***

The 2nd Vatican Council (1965-1968) called the “aggiornamento” bring a new shift in the whole catholic Church. The new understanding<sup>2</sup> of the Church as a People of God also brings a new understanding of the place of the lay people, particularly the place of women.

The Nigeria Church sees in this new situation the possibility of new challenges and new roles for African women. In a paper published after the EATWOT<sup>3</sup> Conference of Mexico in 1986, Edet recognized how the Church provides a new collaboration between men and women, lay people and clerics were having part to mission of God. This new understanding of their role also brings a new understanding of the Church itself which becomes the centre and not the pastors.

With this news, the lateral ministries, mostly held by women, take a new importance beside the organized church as ministries of love commitment. Moreover, the charge of teaching and healing could also be shared by women, role formerly reserved for males due to organisation and structure of the Church, particularly the Catholic Church.

Through the new understanding of the Church, the notion of community and the role of women in Churches and society receive a new understanding that opens a liberation path for them.

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<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Church understood itself during a long time as the *Societa perfecta* where the hierarchy was at the first place. In the dogmatic constitution on the Church named after the two first words of the text (*Lumen Gentium*) and released by the Council we found a new definition of the Church as the People of God. With this definition it was no more the hierarchy, that means the bishops, the priest at the first place but the people of God, the Believers. That was a very important shift.

<sup>3</sup> Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians founded in August 1976 in Dar-es-Saalam (Tanzania).

## **Suggesting New Paradigms in the African Theological Landscape**

### *Nkoyoan Theology of Community*

Gaining the new situation shift by council, it becomes important for Edet to develop a notion of community where all members have the same dignity and role. She states as follows:

The Christian Community, the Church originated from the assembled group of believers of the Christian Message announced by the disciples of Jesus of whom Paul was the foremost. At first these believers regarded themselves simply as Jews and those who heard their message also took them for such. But they also regarded themselves as the “elect of God,” “the holy people,” the Assembly of God. This community awareness constituted them into a new people of God, the new Israel, and so Paul in his letters addresses these Christian communities as “saints” – those determined by God’s saving act. The elected are therefore first and foremost holy, sanctified hence the holy people of God (Udoidem, 2011:5).

Edet’s description is not based on hierarchy or gender. It emphasizes three very distinct elements which are election, sanctification, and attention to one another. These three elements are therefore shared by all and are not the prerogative of any individual member(s) of the community. This concept of community thus understood, rejects any germ of domination by some over others and establishes a space of freedom in which all benefiting from the same call, and the same grace is at the service of the Gospel. In addition, it gives an important place to baptismal dignity, the source of community.

The understanding proposed by Edet shifts a new paradigm introduced by the 2nd Vatican Council. Moreover, she rooted her work in the Pauline heritage interpreted in the context of his communities and his different letters. In fact, Paul’s notion of communities does not know any discrimination, -whether it is red correctly- anyone who stands under the grace belongs to the community, that is why the constitutive notion of Edet of the elected possesses a high relevance. It is God who elects and sanctifies.

The constitutive concept of awareness brought by Edet takes on great signification in the African context. In fact, this element of belonging implies to be part of something greater as oneself. Therefore, it creates a binding force that we all belong to each other, the concept of “Ubuntu”.

By positing the principle of a community whose constitutive elements are neither gendered nor gotten by any merit, Edet gives herself the framework for thinking about the vocation of women for herself in God’s plan and for the consequences for the Church and society.

### ***Women on the Side of God***

Edet begins her reflection by observing traditional Nigerian society<sup>4</sup>, particularly that of her home region and then the Church. A main point of her research is how the rituals (puberty rites, childbirth, marriage and widowhood rites) undertaken by women should be revisited in the light of Christianity. She suggests that the effects of the rituals on African women be examined because: “Women’s ritual in Africa falls under ritual ideology which aims at controlling, in a conservative way the behaviour, the mood, the sentiment and the value of women for the sake of the community as a whole” (Edet, 1992:26). Therefore, as an important and necessary part of community life an individual, ritual should lead rather to the honour and empowerment instead of oppression of women.

If the ritual processes are such an important signification, that is because most of them are attached to the taboo of blood impurity, particularly those around puberty and birthing ritual. The relationship to blood, particularly to women, blood always make a great impression and involves fears. This fear is mostly developed by men and becomes a place of oppression and exclusion of women (although the situation is not a prerogative of African cultures). The rituals of puberty or childbirth<sup>5</sup> will be the place to ward off those fears and draw a separation line between life and death, pure and impure and sacral and profane.

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<sup>4</sup> Even though Nigeria can be perceived as a country with different cultures and therefore of different social settings the expression Nigeria society would be used in singular due to the existence of constants in the societies.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, it is impossible in the framework of this paper to develop all the rituals. Therefore, it would only focus on the main elements.

Facing this situation in the African culture Edet asks a new question in the light of a new understanding of these rituals: are they positive or negative? Are they oppressing or empowering women?

Her first review is to notice positive and negative aspects and how they both affect women. She writes:

The oppressive aspect of the childbirth ritual [...] imparts impurity and guilt to the act of bringing forth new life; it deprives the women of nutritious meals which they need after giving birth, and thus creates health hazard; the segregation deprives women of rights of movement and the ability to seek medical or other needed help and the rites create a sense of inferiority and self-depreciation – they subjugate women and deprive them of self-worth. (Edet, 1992:32)

The review of Edet shows how the negative aspects of rituals lie in a systematic and structural oppression. The denunciation operated by Edet unveils how under a cultural and sacred meaning rituals participated in a form of oppression. This oppression leads to death to the extent that these rituals deprive women of basic and vital care. It is a paradox that a place of life becomes a place of death. Nevertheless, it remains important for Edet to underline some positive aspects:

Childbirth rituals are occasions of thanksgiving, joy, and celebration, as the prayer during the rites indicates. This aspect of the ritual gives the mother a sense of accomplishment and inclusiveness. The mystery of giving birth is the woman's discovery that she is on that plane of life which amounts to a religious experience untranslatable in terms of masculine experience. (Edet, 1992:26).

In fact, it is noticeable that the celebration brings a recognition of this mystery which does not only belong to the woman, but she is the one who can do it. Edet underlines that the mystery resides in the "revelation of the feminine sacredness [which] is the mystic unity between life, woman, nature and the divinity." In other words, the rituals extract the woman from this oppressive situation and elevates her to the rank of co-creator with the divine, in this mystery of birth.<sup>6</sup> Here, one might rightly ask whether that is not the motive of oppression? But the question of Edet

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<sup>6</sup> One could see there a seed for the feminist theology which could be very interesting to extend.

is how this ritual could fit within the Christian custom and open an avenue for society and particularly the Church.

In a context of inculturation and a faith rooted in the African culture, the positive aspect of the childbirth ritual revives the Christian practice of recognizing God as the creator of all things, more specifically of life itself. But even more, it opens a new perspective, according to Edet (1992), in the understanding of the ministries of the word and the sacraments. She expressed her position in the following terms: “This aspect of the ritual<sup>7</sup> should be capitalized upon by Christianity through admission of the fact that women are God-bearers, and as such can be ministers of the word and sacraments. They are not inferior to men, neither are they impure when performing their natural God-given duty of birthing” (Edet, 1992:36). Two things we could understand from her submission are as follows: first, that even the Church of God puts the women in a situation of oppression by refusing them access to ministry; Second it is not the fact of giving birth that is the problem but the interpretation and the understanding, which by the way must be changed and transformed.

Speaking of transformation means that the maternal symbols have to be recognized, appreciated by society and the Church. Furthermore, it is vital for society to take the feminine experience into serious consideration in the building of the nation and church. This implies that Christian faith proclaims the human liberation, equality between men and women, therefore Christianity should not reinforce or legalize women’s oppression, instead it should practically emancipate them from adverse rituals. The Good News should be a liberation good news also for women. Edet proposes a new interpretation by debunking where this exclusion of women came from. She says: “The old adage that women should be seen and not be heard is taken over by the churches and given a biblical foundation in the first letter to the Corinthians. This also affects ecclesial structures so that women are excluded from the ordained ministry and administrative roles of the church and thus remain outsiders in the church” (Edet, 1992:36).

By denouncing the perverse structure of the rituals of traditional society Edet also highlights those of the Church that oppress women. In

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<sup>7</sup> Edet referred here to the celebration of the mother and her newborn.

this way, she can appeal to rediscover the goal of liberation that originates from the Gospel and the role of the Church to be an agent of this liberation of men and women. Moreover, it puts at the center an understanding of the celebration of the sacraments as ritual in their constitutive dimension in these terms: “The fact that the church has rites underscore the necessity of rituals in our lives. Rituals are the sacramental self-realization of the individual or the church and are indispensable. All the church’s rites of passage and its healing rites are rooted in the Scripture” (Edet 1992:36). It becomes clear that the Church has to incorporate the positives aspect of the traditional ritual, which would be an important act of inculturation but also of expression of liberation.

According to Edet, the path of liberation that is built through this act of inculturation must be understood as follows: “the whole rite should be that of thanksgiving and celebration during which our alienation from God, society, and self is acknowledged and even proclaimed. Thus, the bipolar tension of life is met by the simultaneous acceptance of wholeness and infirmity, deprivation and restoration, alienation and reconciliation” (Edet, 1992:36). Edet states that the reviewing of the childbirth ritual by the Church releases a saving and liberating power of Word of God. For Jesus the Christ, the Word of God reconciles us to the Father. So, in a context and praxis that rest on words and healing ministry, the Church by stopping harmful tradition establishes a place where the word of liberation is proclaimed. Furthermore, Jesus was the one who liberated the woman with blood issues, so he never tortured, excluded or segregated anyone.

In short, for Edet, by liberating women from degrading and segregating practices and recognizing this particular ministry of giving life, the Church rediscovers her primary vocation, that of proclaiming the Gospel of freedom and salvation. Edet thus challenges the Church in her responsibility towards the people of God in her struggle for liberation and salvation.

Putting the women by the side of God renews some conception of the Church. In fact, when the Church is designated as mother,<sup>8</sup> she is called to fulfil this vocation for all her sons and daughters. It is a question of

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<sup>8</sup> The Roman Catholic Church Ecclesiology is very familiar with the expression: “*Ecclesia mater et magistra*” i.e. The Church is Mother and Teacher.

giving them freedom instead of establishing rules that exclude them. For her the Church must stand with her Children. In this light Edet stated:

The feeling of a share in divine activity should proceed from an encounter with the Word within the Church as a healing community and with its members as the bearers of the healing power. The minister within this context is a healer as bearer of the Word. The Word is also in the mother and in all women members of the church as priestly, kingly, and prophetic people; therefore, there should be women ministers, women who have actually experienced and shared in the divine activity of creation (Edet, 1992:37).

By this statement, Edet gives a great foundation which could be pleading for more recognized women's ministry.<sup>9</sup> Edet's commitment to women's recognition in the church and society did not only play a role for the African Church. Some seeds find and echoes, even years later in a development of some feminist theology and Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann is one of the figures.

## **A Legacy in Discussion with the Echoes of Sr Edet in Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann**

Sister Edet's reflection can be echoed with that proposed by Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann. Although Edet does not develop a Christology or a soteriology of liberation, the displacement she suggests induces a Christological reflection proposed by Wendel-Moltmann, who acknowledges the receipt from the work of the Women's Conference of the EATWOT.<sup>10</sup>

For Wendel-Moltmann (2010), talking about the childbirth ritual, giving birth, or natality, puts a focus on the very existential dimension of humanity. The fact of being born has been forgotten by theology. The gaze and practice consisting only of thinking about purifying the woman from her impurity. But the stakes here are greater in so far as what we

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<sup>9</sup> It matters to underline here how far and avant-gardist this statement is for a roman catholic nun after the Council. The women ministry in the Roman Catholic Church is till today a shibboleth even if there is an ongoing discussion about it.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann was a German feminist theologian, one of the first of her generation.

can and must find is the incarnated dimension of our existence and, above all, the central place of the corporeality.

According to Wendel-Moltmann, it is not just about rediscovering the centrality of our body, but also to rediscover Jesus as the birthed one. This means that natality was never an important part in the theology. It does not play a role because as we have already noticed, it is always linked with impurity. The focus on the impurity of women during childbirth has caused the entire theology to lose sight of what the incarnation of Christ might mean. Because there is no incarnation without a birth and talking about birth leads to looking positively at the woman and all that surrounds this wonderful moment. But even more, Wendel-Moltmann's resumption of the struggle of African women is to "deconstruct rational theology, which devalues the physical life and more particularly the body and sexuality of women." (Wendel-Moltmann, 2010) shows us to what extent the problem is not only in Africa but also in the whole Church.

As Wendel-Moltmann noticed, the incarnation of Jesus is neither just a moment of the history nor a myth. It tells us that Jesus is a man who is born, who grows up and moreover as Edet says, he was revolutionary. According to Edet, his incarnate experience made him close to the widow, the hemorrhoid woman and all other women in distress. He did not torture or segregate them or ask for any purification ritual. He simply made himself the friend, the loving one, the savior, the liberator (Edet, 1992).

## Epilogue

Focusing her research and theological statements on the building of a community according to God's will and a renewal of the sight on women in the society, Rosemary Edet shifts new paradigms in the theological fields in Africa. She gives a critical positive insight in her evaluation of ritual in the traditional society, even if it could be ambivalent. She underlines for example the birth ritual as a positive moment for women. In fact, she sees in the rituals on the birth of a child the celebration of life, the closeness of God and of woman as co-creator of God.

The equal dignity of all the baptized expresses in a particular way how the liberation obtained at the cross is freedom and salvation for all. This freedom and equal dignity should be visible in the structure of the



Church that proclaims this Good News of liberation. That was the aim, in the short but powerful legacy of Sr Rosemary. As she writes: “As a concerned African woman, I wish to remind the Churches that women are part of the people of God and the body of Christ. We are called for freedom and salvation” (Edet, 1992:37). To this end therefore, it stands to reason that the suffering of a part of the Church is a suffering of the whole body called Church. Furthermore, if a part of the Church still does not feel the wind of freedom and salvation as proclaimed by it, then one might question the authenticity and seriousness attached to the message.

Edet has just blazed a path which, unfortunately, has not been pursued either by itself or by others. However, her desire for liberation is still shared today by the theologians who came after her.

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# 13 | “...THE MISSION OF CHRIST ... IS A CALL TO DUTY”: TOWARDS ROSE MARY AMENGA-ETEGO’S THEOLOGY OF THE GREATER GOOD OF AFRICA

*Sarah Korang Sansa*

## **Abstract**

This chapter engages and analyses the African post-colonial framed theological writings of Rose Mary Amenga-Etego as one of the matriarchs of the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*. The study aims at examining and celebrating the contributions of these African Women theologians to scholarship on African Liberation theologies. Examining her own words, as quoted in the title of this chapter (Amenga-Etego, 2006:42), the analysis sought to understand her constructive theological engagement with the questions and concerns rising in contemporary Africa, and the place of theology in responding to those questions for the greater good of Africa, specifically, in the Ghanaian context. The paper, therefore, sought to do this from three main methodological lenses; the sources/context, distinctiveness, and purpose of which she theologizes. These methodological lenses help to conceptualize her theological vision, which outlines her strategic theological contributions to scholarship. Therefore, this chapter depicts her thought on socio-cultural matters, drawing the attention of not only governmental and traditional institutions but also academia and the church.

## **Introduction**

In a changing and transforming world, where diverse questions in need of answers keep rising, there has been an interest from both scientific and most thriving, and recent, religious, and cultural perspectives. Issues arising from gender, ecology, modernization, colonialization etc., have attracted a great number of contributions from scholars across all fields of study. Theologians over the decade have invaded the socio-cultural sciences to discuss matters, which they believe needs theological reflections also. In Africa specifically, there has been a rise of scholars, and for the interest of this study, theologians, who have tremendously produced theol-

gies that have inspired scholarly and theological advancement, for the enrichment of the scope of theological scholarship. Amenga-Etego is one of the empowered female African theologians whose scholarly work reflects a high degree of theological innovativeness and importance to society and the church. As a Ghanaian woman and *Nankani* by tribe, she wears and walks in a lens that views herself as the starting point of her theological endeavor (Amenga-Etego, 2008:188). She not only begins her investigation from herself, but she also situates herself within a familiar context which grants her a command in the issues arising from that context. This chapter is narrowed by a careful selection of eight scholarly writings of Amenga-Etego, and hence, it does its critical examination through these papers, together with some selected authors whose theological approaches supports Amenga-Etego's writings. Therefore, this chapter aims to introduce, dissect, and upraise her scholarly work as a golden and positive front for African women theologians and their contribution for the greater good of Africa. This paper will do this by first, briefly introducing the life and academic background of Amenga-Etego. Secondly, it will examine her methodology through these three main spheres: Sources and context of her theology, purpose of her theology, uniqueness of her theology. Lastly, her words as the title of this chapter indicates; ...*Towards the Greater Good of Africa*, will be examined.

## Life/Academic Background

Born as a daughter of the *Nankani* tribe (Amenga-Etego, 2018) in the Upper East Region of Ghana, Amenga-Etego has grown to become one of the important and leading voices in women liberation and in the appraisal of African traditional religion. Living in a rural community and having an educational privilege that has taken her around different cities in Ghana and beyond, Amenga-Etego has gained rich insights in rural and urban communal life and development (Amenga-Etego, 2018:5-8). This has informed greatly and widely her theology, which would be discussed in the coming sections of this chapter. She is currently a senior lecturer in religious studies at the department for the study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon. She is a research fellow for the Institute for theology and religion (RITR), University of South Africa, South Africa

(Amenga-Etego, 2020:10). Also, with her interest and drive for gender issues in religion and culture, she served as a development worker on *Gender and Development* from 1992 to 2002 in the Navrongo-Bolgatanga diocese of the Catholic Church of Ghana (Amenga-Etego, 2006:28). She is one of the strong pillars and members of the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (Amenga-Etego, 2006:28). She has authored several articles, and is well known for her book, *Mending the Broken Pieces*. The coming sections of this chapter reviews some of her works and reveals her theological wisdom, its contributions to scholarship, and its practicalities in both societal and church life.

## Rose Mary Amenga-Etego's Methodology/ Theology

This section discusses the methodological lenses used in Rose Mary Amenga-Etego's scholarly works. It examines the sources/context, purpose, and uniqueness of her theological reflection. This will help in interpreting her theological formation and approach in academic scholarship.

## Sources and Context

Amenga-Etego's academic interest in religion and culture and how they influence human living, both for good and ill, has been one of the main conversational themes in her research. As a woman who hails from a small village that upholds indigenous religious beliefs, and culture, she has acquired the necessary understanding in African spirituality (Amenga-Etego, 2016:16). Hence, in her writings, she engages the experiences in the daily lives of rural people, especially, among the tribes in the Upper East Region of Ghana. She does this engagement by listening to, understanding, and interpreting the stories of native people, as a methodological lens. An example is in the case of the *Phenomenon of Nankani Spirit Children*, who for many years have been ritually removed or expelled<sup>1</sup> from the Nankani community. This is due to the believe that

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<sup>1</sup> The Nankani perform a ritual of transformation that enables the *spirit child* to return to their normal abode and lifestyle. This ritual is done through divination, and most paramount, through the ritual of *nyusigo*. *Nyusigo* is an act of

they are misplaced spirits whose presence in the community is destructive and can cause disharmony in the socio-cultural reality of the Nankani (Amenga-Etego, 2008:190). Amenga-Etego uses this story as an entry point to examine and discuss this religio-cultural practice, asking *what* and *who* questions, to understand the root meaning of this religious experience (Amenga-Etego, 2008:185). These stories do not only help her conceptualizations, but they have also become a steppingstone for analyzing the positivity's and negativities of such a practice. Hence, she leverages on the result of the research to discuss from an academic standpoint the religious destiny of *chinchirisi/chinchirigo*<sup>2</sup>, who have not developed the capacity to speak for themselves, and as well their mothers who have been conditioned to accept such a fate for their freshly born babies (Amenga-Etego, 2008:190-191). It is academically insightful to note how she challenges and problematizes the interpretations and introductions of local and international human rights laws which have not taken into consideration the religio-cultural roots of the phenomenon (Amenga-Etego, 2008:198). She believes that a contextual understanding (cultural and socio-economic conditions) of this practice could be a good step to negotiate the best approaches to handling this matter from the grassroots (Amenga-Etego:199-209).

We find this conceptual form of analysis in her discussion on the *Tindana*<sup>3</sup> (Amenga-Etego, 2012:121-124) of the Upper East Region of Ghana, which questions colonial Western interpretations of good governance in their contact with indigenous people. She queries their labels of the indigenous system of governance as *stateless* and dissects how such a view of indigenous administration, and the introduction of a decentralized form of governance has hindered the freedom of indigenous people's de-

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*force feeding* a child with liquid substances. This particular substance is specially prepared by those who have spiritual resources to determine and remove the *spirit child* known traditionally as *chinchirigo* (plural)/*chinchirisi* (Singular). This ritual which causes the death of these babies, which in modern terms is known as *murder*, they are not traditionally seen as such. According to the tradition of the Nankani, it is an act of *sending off* those children to the spirit world where they belong. *See:* (Amenga-Etego, 2008:191-192).

<sup>2</sup> Spirit Children.

<sup>3</sup> They are the owners of land and see to its protection and use.

velopment (Amenga-Etego, 2012:119). She discusses deeply how a misplaced view of the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of indigenous people could be harmful to growth and conflicting to rural governance. She also, suggests that a duplication of the already existing indigenous governance is a catalyst to inter-power struggles, and a detriment to rural expansion (Amenga-Etego, 2012:131). Amenga-Etego's 2012 paper on *Tribes without rulers?* addresses these disturbing issues. In the paper, she acknowledges the *Tindanaship* together with its winged indigenous chieftaincy as a good post-colonial and modern example of indigenous decentralized governance. She argues that this indigenous decentralized governance is a twin to western decentralized system and could be used to achieve sustainable development (Amenga-Etego, 2012:131). She raises this argument from the stance that "the *tindana's* special relationship with the environment as a spiritual entity enable them to seek ways of living that promotes sustainability, which is a key concept in modern developmental discourses since the 1980's" (Amenga-Etego, 2012:130).

In the story of the reinterpreted oral text for the all-female hall in the university of Ghana, Amenga-Etego deliberates on the foundational and fundamental reasons behind this reinterpretation. For the emancipation of African women, especially Ghanaian women, the moto, *Akokɔbere nso nim adekyee* which literally means *the hen indeed knows it is dawn*, has gained dominance in the hearts and minds of the female occupants of the hall for several years (Ross & Amenga-Etego, 2015:4). Emanating from the Akan saying, *Akokɔbere nim adekyee nso ohwe onini ano* (*the hen knows it is dawn but looks up to the cock to crow*), Amenga-Etego analyzes the impact of this indigenous traditional saying together with other sayings. She measures them from their contribution to violence and at the same time, women's empowerment (Amenga-Etego, 2015:3). Therefore, she draws from these indigenous oral texts to consolidate the deeply rooted violence which has been clothed in words for many years. She reflects on these oral texts to expose its danger to female advancement and protection. As an outsider (a Nankani) who examines what she terms a political constructed oral text of the Akan,<sup>4</sup> she positions herself as an insider, that is, a Ghanaian woman and a member of the *Volta Hall*

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<sup>4</sup> One of the dominant tribes in Ghana.

(Ross & Amenga-Etego, 2015:5). She makes use of cultural interpretations as an academic gate for reinterpretations. She as well, uses indigenous oral traditions as a source of traditional terror and as well empowerment when reinterpreted. Her observations, interrogations, and encounter with the Akan culture and its oral texts aids her to examine the “variety of other sayings that downgrade women to enable them to visibly project, empower, uplift, honor and dignify men and boys” (Ross & Amenga-Etego, 2015:8). To strengthen her argumentation, she scrutinizes traditional proverbs and myths to reveal the patriarchal structures, constructed in words and stories that “dehumanizes, humiliate, disempower, and terrify women and girls, violating their dignity and personhood” (Ross & Amenga-Etego, 2015:7-8). I will leave this for the discussion on the aims and purposes of Amenga-Etego’s works, but I would conclude this section by introducing her collaborative research on *Language, Prayer, and Music Repertoires as sources of African Christian Spirituality*.

In this article, *Language, Prayer and Music Repertoires as sources of African Christian Spirituality*, Emenga-Etego in collaborative research, evaluates the impact of “African metaphors and values and how they influence African spirituality, values, and Christian theology” (Amenga-Etego *et al.*, 2020:2). Her personal place of interest in this study was the unexplored displacement of African Christianity from its African traditional ethos such as African spirituality and values (Amenga-Etego *et al.*, 2020:2). African spirituality has been argued by several African scholars as the continuum where African Christianity finds expression. According to the late renowned African Theologian, Kwame Bediako, African Christianity reflects a high degree African primal spirituality (Bediako, 2013:89). By this assertion he meant that imbibed in African Christianity is the primal imagination that comes from their cultural worldview. Hence, in Christian worship, God is interacted through the breath of their cultural perceptions of life. We find this expressed in songs, prayers, affirmations, prophecies etc. The worship of Afua Kuma, a Ghanaian Christian, who engaged God from the lenses of her Akan worldview, serves as a strong paradigm for this investigation (Amenga-Etego *et al.*, 2020:6). Amenga-Etego’s interest in the songs of *Suzzy and Matt*, the two Ghanaian female gospel stars from the early 90’s, brings light to the indigenization and inculturation of the gospel through Ghanaian music.

(Amenga-Etego *et al.*, 2020:5) thus, believes that "some aspects of the indigenization and inculturation of the gospel were actually at variance with the indigenous religio-cultural worldview, thereby transforming the latter within contemporary Ghanaian society." Accordingly, she and her colleagues see the absence of oral indigenous African human cultural experiences in the academic scene as an impediment to academic scholarship on African Christianity. Amenga-Etego *et al.*, (2020:4) rather opine that 'much work remains to be done to preserve and analyze oral theologies in order to better grasp the complexities of contemporary African Christian spirituality and values.' These field ethnographical observation and oral literary method shows Amenga-Etego's interest in using cultural forms as a means of engaging her theological reflections. Nonetheless, the purpose of her theologizing could help in understanding these basics that informs her drive for religious academic scholarship.

## Purpose

Amenga-Etego's research objective which will be briefly discussed in the coming sections, suggests an appraisal of the greater good of Africa from a womanist and indigenous religious perspective. Borrowing from her own words, "the task of the church is to spread its wings beyond the borders of its confinement, to impact the world positively." As a female Ghanaian religious scholar, who has experienced Ghanaian culture in both society and the church, she uses her experiences, knowledge, and concerns to reflect on the woes of women, indigenous traditions, and rural development. This, she sees as a task of the religious scholar. Therefore, her scholarly work mirrors this vision and encapsulates her desire for positive change and expansion, not only in Ghana, but Africa as a whole. Consequently, on Amenga-Etego's theological works on tribes in the Northern region of Ghana, we see her vision as explained briefly, fleshed out on how she engages issues concerning women and indigenous traditions. Her theological thinking is fueled by her interest in women liberation, empowerment, and the evaluation of indigenous cultural belief systems.

Starting this discourse from the latter, she believes that the religio-cultural environment of a given people is the highest form of human freedom and expression of their conceptual beliefs of the universe. She



submits that that human dignity can be earned through the liberty to uphold what a community hold dear in their religious worldview. Therefore, her research focuses on understanding these beliefs through careful examinations and analysis. In the light of the most sensitive and inhuman practices as most contemporary outsiders would term it, she is careful not to make quick judgements; she rather seeks for an understanding of meanings behind the cultural forms of those practices. For example, in the case of the *Nankani chin chirigo*; the practice which has received massive attention from both international and local human right activists and governmental agencies, she advises that a thorough study of the religio-cultural forms in the practicing communities be done before any measures or interventions are put in place (Amenga-Etego, 2008:209-210). She also, suggest that implementations done in consultation with community leaders and members, could help bring about a smooth and less conflicting approach to problem solving (Amenga-Etego, 2008:203-204). This communal-inclusion approach in Amenga-Etego's observation, could help stakeholders and researchers to appreciate, collaborate and corporate with the culture and tradition which they have stepped into (Amenga-Etego, 2008:198-200). Alison Howell, an Australian theologian, who lived amongst the Kasena of northern Ghana acknowledges this approach. In her article, *Avoiding Mislabeled and Misnaming*, she admits to the difficulties outsiders face when they encounter aspects of cultural beliefs and practices that is new to them. According to her, the immediate thought of bemusement as an outsider in a traditional environment usually leads to quick judgements and mislabeling (Howell, 2014:5). She therefore, cautions researchers not to be too quick to conclude on what they see, rather, they must endeavor to understand the meanings behind the cultural forms they encounter. In that way, one could have a clearer vision to ask the right questions and to suggest interventions when the need arise (Howell, 2014:5-7).

In the *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora*, we find a similar but varying approach to the aims of Amenga-Etego's theology. She discusses the complexities in the role of indigenous researchers in academia, in her paper on *Crossing Research Boundaries 'Our Nankani Daughter in Academia'*. In this write-up, she shows the internal

difficulties on "how a religio-cultural insider could negotiate the boundaries of the sacred and the secular in relation to the Western academic demands of empirical referencing" (Amenga-Etego, 2018:5). She challenges academic standardized requirement for research as it limits indigenous researchers in their quest to include the translation of rich undocumented indigenous data in their western framed scholarly written texts (Amenga-Etego, 2018:7). Hence, she asserts that Western academic research could find its feet and hands if it could make room for indigenous researchers to feel at home in their academic engagements (Amenga-Etego, 2018:8-9). The purpose for this is to credit the importance of indigenous researchers and their unique role in academia and to sound an alarm on the limitations of crossing research boundaries from the traditional viewpoint to academia (Amenga-Etego, 2018:7). She divulges to the struggle of researcher's positionalities; thus, the conflicting communal bond researchers share between themselves in academia and their respective indigenous communities (Amenga-Etego, 2018:8). By implication, there is always a bone to contend with when the indigenous insider-researcher, crosses boundaries into academia to reflect on traditional discourses. Therefore, by exposing this internal and external concern, she reflects on the complex research endeavor that indigenous researcher like herself would have to wrestle with in academic scholarship (Amenga-Etego, 2018:12).

Also, Amenga-Etego's respond to her drive for the emancipation of women by showing keen interest in gender-based discourses on violence against women, as well as, espousing the importance of women in communal development as discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. As a Ghanaian woman, she understands the dangers patriarchal structures impose on women in Ghana. Therefore, she challenges these structures through the interpretations and reinterpretations of oral texts, in addition to, challenging traditional systems that put women in direct or indirect bondage. We see this in her paper on oral proverbs and myths' translation in *Women's Interpretation of Indigenous Oral Texts*. As discussed earlier, she is of the opinion that certain aspects of indigenous oral texts has been politically constructed to suppress women and the girl-child (Amenga-Etego, 2015:3). She calls these texts, *Tests of Terror*, which has the tendency to inflict different forms of violence on women

(Amenga-Etego, 2015:3). This violence come disguised in the form of suppression that demean the value of females. However, she admits to the importance of traditional proverbs and sayings, which are repositories of wisdom and knowledge from communal ancestors and forefathers. Amenga-Etego (2015:8-10) is also aware of the damages they could cause when they are taken and spoken literally, without deciphering the multiple meanings behind them. For instance, that of the Akan myth of an old woman whose nuisance in her cooking duty expelled God from humanity and causing the death of men at the obedience to her word (Amenga-Etego, 2015:11-12), raises disturbing questions in Amenga-Etego's reflection. She examines this myth as one that justifies women as the cause for God's withdrawal from humanity and view women as murderers and unwise (Amenga-Etego, 2015:11-13). This understanding clearly, portray women, especially old women as the evil ones in society, which questions the intent of this myth. Therefore, she cautions women to "question and perhaps, reconstruct this myth in ways that are gender sensitive and humanly dignifying to both gender" (Amenga-Etego, 2015:11). Viewing from a more visible or physical perspective, Amenga-Etego recalls the massacre of women from 1998 to 2002 in Ghana which aroused women across the nation to rise unto prayer, and to protest the unseen killers (Amenga-Etego, 2006:23-24). The strange and inhuman act that happened in the public permeated in different forms and acts in the daily lives of the people in Ghana. Men became violent on women verbally and physically. Hence, many women across the nation went through physical assault and emotional and psychological trauma. Today, Ghana is still faced with these injustices against women, which in Amenga-Etego's postulation is destructive and causes fear and panic amongst women in the Ghanaian society (Amenga-Etego, 2006:33-34). She, therefore, questions the governmental structures that have been put in place since the 1998 and 2002 serial killing of women, and challenges them to play effective roles in eradicating the continued violence against women in the Ghanaian society (Amenga-Etego, 2006:36). These units include, the Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU), the Ministry of Women and Children affairs, the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Girl-Child Education Unit, and many others.

She raises the concern for "one-side, single-handed interventions to issues of violence against women" which has been a serious detriment to gender-based violence annihilation, and "calls for a collaborative approach from civil society, gender activists, government and the religious bodies to strive to overcome it" (Amenga-Etego, 2006:27). Further, she calls the church to leverage on their Christian principles to address issues of this sort in their sermons, and to join hands with the civil society to fight against the sin of violence (Amenga-Etego, 2006:36). She also, concludes that the church needs to be a safe house where women who have been abused can find solace, and not a place where they are mocked and marginalized (Amenga-Etego, 2006:36-38).

Moving further from the discourse on violence, another liberative theological approach for women is Amenga-Etego's vision to uphold the Nankani rural women with regards to their role in ecological protection. This is made evident in her article, *Nankani Women's Spirituality and Ecology*. She narrates how the spiritual universe of the Nankani culture encompasses respect and honor for *Wine's (God)* creation, and hence set taboos to prohibit a dishonor to his property" (Amenga-Etego, 2016:15-25). In other words, the Nankani out of respect for their God and his created universe, strive to protect his creation by exercising a sustainable use of their environment. This has been a practice that according to Amenga-Etego, has been directly and indirectly enforced by Nankani women. In her description of their household duty as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters to the Nankani tribe, Nankani women control how traditional customs are observed through her control of food provision and how she manages the extraction of environmental produce (Amenga-Etego, 2016:25). These she reviews as vital roles that enforces sustenance of the environment, and that of their families and indigenous spirituality (Amenga-Etego, 2016:28). Therefore, it is Amenga-Etego's aim to promote the sacrifices of these rural women, challenging the patriarchal system in that community and the rest of society to see the value of women in society and their role in sustainable development. These and the above points give a clear picture of Amenga-Etego's Christian and religious intent to produce a theology that informs a duty of change, thus, towards the greater good of African communities, specifically, Ghana.

## Uniqueness

Amenga-Etego's unique theological voice is made audible in how she engages theology from a religio-cultural and socio-cultural perspective, examining the daily lives of people through their lived religions and cultural worldviews. She expresses concerns for the marginalized and vulnerable and discusses possible solutions for the upliftment of people in those unfortunate positions. As a Nankani woman, she does not see herself as far removed from her tribal lineage as an academician, she rather seizes that as an advantage to understand and reflect on her own cultural experiences together with the community in which she grew up in (Amenga-Etego, 2016:16-17). By 'togetherness' I mean the shared bond of feelings, struggles, and concerns. She does this with a solemn sincerity and constructive academic discipline to produce theological reflections that is both locally and academically acceptable and useful. As a woman who has experienced patriarchal structures from both her rural community and surrounding national environment, she is well grounded in matters that silence women, and objectifies their value. Therefore, in her writings, she crosses the boundaries of social structural defaults from both local and national levels and throws a challenge to rural communities, national political agenda, and international agencies to ease up from prejudices, misconceptions, academic standardized pressures, and dormancy. She is of the view that theology should have a sound place on the streets where there are real and existential issues, and the church must play a role in it as pioneers to the call of God (Amenga-Etego, 2006).

Amenga-Etego is however, quite unique in her conceptual approach to theology because, she begins her research and theological reflection from firstly, herself as a Nankani woman and secondly, a religious studies scholar. This starting point from herself, leads her into deeper and richer theologizing, because she can critically engage her biases, limitations, and strengths both on the field and academic scholarship. The intersection between women liberation, cultural and academic discourses give her a complex but innovative room to explore. As a woman, hailing from one of the poorest regions in Ghana (Amenga-Etego, 2008:204), and having the privilege of quality education has earned her a resourceful academic authority to punch into the right holes and to provide reliable justification to matters she discusses in the field. I view Amenga-Etego's

ability to balance her individuality as an insider with that of the "other" as an outsider, is an outstanding trait of a researcher (Amenga-Etego, 2015:5-6). Also, her ability to embrace the difficulty of a female Nankani researcher in a male dominated and politically constructed system both in her native community and surrounding local and national communities is remarkable (Amenga-Etego, 2008:12). Therefore, it is of necessary importance to acknowledge the unique scholarly work of this important female matriarch in the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*. The next section of this chapter briefly but thoroughly discusses her theology, *Towards the Greater Good of Africa*.

### **Towards the Greater Good of Africa: Engaging the Words and Work of Rose Mary Amenga-Etego**

In her article, *Violence against Women in Contemporary Ghanaian Society*, Amenga-Etego resounds that "the call to the mission of Christ is not a call to peace, comfort, safety, or rest; It is a call to duty" (Amenga-Etego, 2006:42). In other words, the Christian call goes beyond the privileges it brings, it is rather one which is of sacrifice and selflessness. By sacrifice, it means, looking beyond the comfort of oneself and reaching out to the suffocating, oppressed, and marginalized. And by so doing, the mission of Christ would be accomplished here on earth. These words are not just strong and thought-provoking, they are a call to Christians in every sphere of life to deeper Christian living. Thus, irrespective of one's occupation, they have been commissioned to leverage on their expertise and knowledge to contribute to a change or make a difference in an ever-changing world just like Christ would (Goheen, 2014:59). As a devout Catholic and a religious scholar, who has traveled across academic borders, Amenga-Etego stretches her arm within and beyond the confines of the church and academic world, using her voice to defend the voiceless, and to respond to pressing issues that needs close and keen attention. We see this vision play out well in the discussion above on her academic writings among many others. This has been discovered in her interpretations on indigenous Ghanaian culture, gender issues in religion and African tradition, raising methodological concerns of indigenous African

scholars and highlighting the importance of indigenous system of governance. These positive explorations are what this paper term as *towards the Greater Good of Africa*.

Amenga-Etego, has demonstrated through her research in Ghana that African's do have the capacity to speak in their own terms on issues that confronts them daily. These issues, as discussed above, could be rooted out if the church and society are staged to converse on a mutual ground, towards a change they all envision to see. These include, women liberation and empowerment, towards a sustainable development for both national and rural communities, bridging the gap between academia, church, and society, for a holistic contribution towards Ghana's socio-cultural and economic development. This unique theologizing of Amenga-Etego, therefore, is a positive front and paradigm for Africa's post-colonial liberation, that serves as a catalyst to destroy the inequalities of class, race, gender, and inspires awareness, critical dialogue, and the integration of ideas from both African and western perspectives. This will, hence, serve as an opening for western scholars to carefully, engage African cultures and traditions in scholarship. That is to respectfully create a space for African scholars and church to dive deeper into indigenous untapped realities for the good of Africa. Therefore, the above analysis of Amenga-Etego's theological spectrum proves that Africa do have the innate ability to rise into a continent that is confident to engage and to work towards a positive change.

## **Personal Reflection**

As a Ghanaian ecotheologian, who has roots in the Northern region of Ghana, but born and raised in Southern Ghana, I am left in great wonder and dilemma at the same time as I read the works of Amenga-Etego. Her works amongst the Nankani and that of its neighboring environs strikes in me the complexities in insider-indigenous research. As an insider-outsider myself, I might face communal challenges, as I may be viewed as foreign to my traditional community. Hence, I may experience internal and external struggles in academic scholarship due to difficulties and ambiguities in data collection and analysis. Therefore, the work of Amenga-Etego, which echo's the reality of insider-outsider struggles and vice

versa, has hinted me on the complexities in the positionalities of researchers in academic research. This awareness, therefore, leaves me with the quest to understand the varying viewpoints in indigenous research. It also, raises questions on how insider-outsiders who have interest to explore research in their detached indigenous local communities could conduct research appropriately.

From an ecological standpoint, Amenga-Etego's findings on Nankani women and their role in environmental protection, contributes greatly to African ecotheological discourses on creation care from indigenous African cultural practices. Therefore, based on its rich ecofeminist input, this ecological research from Nankani women needs to be further engaged and explored to contribute to the ongoing conversation on feminist approaches to ecotheology.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has endeavored to examine the scholarly work of Rose Mary Amenga-Etego. It has explored the theological layers found in her own words as the title of this paper has indicated. This has been done through a thorough discussion of her theology that suggest a change for *the greater good of Africa*, with special reference to Ghana. The paper has demonstrated this *greater good* by examining her post-colonial theological interest in women and African liberation and engaging her keen interest to repudiate oppressive Ghanaian cultures for the good of the Ghanaian society. As a Christian herself, she has exhibited her Christian *call to duty*, by continually engaging pressing matters in the society as discussed above and invites the church to do same. Finally, on a personal ground, Amenga-Etego's positionality as a Nankani researcher amongst the Nankani of northern Ghana and her contribution to ecofeminism has enlightened the writer of this chapter. Thus, it has given her room to reflect deeply on her positionality in academic research.



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## 14 | IN THE LIBERATING ECCLESIA WITH GRACE SINTIM-ADASI

*Georgina Kwanima Boateng*

### **Abstract**

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) started in 1989 as a place for women to write their own stories and contribute to the discourses of religion and culture that affect their lives from their own perspectives. Grace Sintim-Adasi is one such scholars whose voice has been raised through research and writing. Grace identifies inequalities in ecclesiastical and the academic spaces between men and women especially in the area of leadership and promotion, which is influenced heavily by the socio-cultural perceptions of Ghanaians. This chapter will examine the works of Grace Sintim-Adasi, by examining the contexts underlying her publications and what approaches she has employed in bringing out her main arguments. The paper will also identify the sources the matriarch has used by examining field case studies and her collaborations with other scholars. The paper will then highlight how Adasi has addressed patriarchy in religious and academic spaces and the way forward for the future for ordained women and women academics.

**Keywords:** Grace Sintim-Adasi, The Circle, ordained women, women leadership, church leadership

### **Introduction**

In the Ghanaian context and I suspect, in many other contexts, the history of educational and institutional church has actively involved women in one way or another. In Ghana, we can speak of education in the domestic setting where women play a foundational and forefront role as well as the beginnings of formal mission schools. Within religious circles also, many churches and religious groups' stories can hardly go full circle without referring to the contributions of women. Yet, somehow, within these same spaces, when it comes to leadership, the door is suddenly closed in women's faces. Women's contributions to the development of

these spaces, therefore, are at best spoken of as minimal and insignificant and sometimes as non-existent.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle) was formally inaugurated in 1989 as a place for women to write their own stories and contribute to the discourses of religion and culture that affect their lives from their own perspectives. “The Circle ‘do theology’ in the mode of resistance, in a ‘wakeup call’ for women to arise out of lethargy and describe their space in post-independence Africa” (Pemberton, 2003:159). Rev Dr. Grace Sintim-Adasi is one such scholars whose voice has been raised through research and writing to tell the stories of the contributions of women to ecclesial and academic development. Her writings seek to expose the relatively steeper hill that women in leadership, especially in the church and academia, are faced with in navigating these spaces.

This chapter will study the works of Grace Sintim-Adasi, by examining the contexts underlying her publications and what approaches she has employed in bringing out her main arguments. The paper will also identify the sources the matriarch has used for her research and writing by examining field case studies and her collaborations with other scholars. The paper will then highlight how Adasi has addressed patriarchy in religious and academic spaces and the way forward for the future for ordained women and women academics.

## Overview of Writings of Grace Sintim-Adasi

Grace Sintim-Adasi has authored and co-authored many publications on themes of gender, women in ministry, hierarchies, leadership, inclusion and seclusion, and culture. Her flagship book, *Gender and Change: Roles and Challenges of Ordained Women Ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, was published in 2016. It looks at the emergence of women’s ordination in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, as well as the roles’ ordained women have played and challenges they encounter in the face of attitudes and prejudices of the society. Generally, around the same themes also is her paper, “Multiple Roles of African Women Leaders and Their Challenges: The Case of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.” This paper however cast more focus on the many roles of women in church

leadership because of culture stereotypes in a patriarchal society and the pressures these places on women. Before the publication of her book, Sintim-Adasi had also researched and published extensively on the gender roles and gaps in higher education institutions. Two of such publications were her 2015, “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana” and 2014, “Women and Contemporary Roles: Bridging the Gender Gap for Organizational Effectiveness. The Case of Accra Polytechnic, Ghana” which she co wrote with Rita Sarkodie Baffoe and Christine Ampofo Ansah. Both of these publications were published in the journal, *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*.

Sintim-Adasi has favored a deconstructionist approach through unravelling the stories of women and the exposing he cultural and religious perceptions behind the barriers placed on women leadership in church and academy. Sintim- Adasi has cooperated with psychologists and educationists in her work. We can speak in this regard, of her paper, “Gender Influence on Pre-service Teachers’ Emotional Intelligence at Selected Colleges of Education in Ghana”, published in 2020 in the *American Journal of Education Research* 8(10).

## **Examination of Contexts of the Writings of Adasi**

In examining the contexts of the writings of Grace Sintim-Adasi, I present a brief bio-graphical sketch. Dr. Grace Sintim-Adasi (born 15th March 1969) is currently the principal of the Agogo Presbyterian Women’s College of Education in Ghana. She is also affiliated with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana as a Research Fellow. She received her PhD in the Study of Religions from the University of Ghana and holds an MPhil in African Studies from the same Institution. Sintim-Adasi also holds an MA in Educational Leadership and Management from the University of Ghana. She was commissioned and ordained as a Reverend Minister in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in 2010 and 2012 respectively.

Sintim-Adasi is firmly situated in her Ghanaian contexts in her research and writing and as a Ghanaian woman, writes from the perspec-

tive of liberation theology, which “Miguel De la Torre defends as a revolutionary theory that entails Christian solidarity with the poor and oppressed, those on the “underside” of history” (McCracken, 2014:14), in a world where the histories of women in church and society have reflected marginalization of their contributions, Sintim-Adasi’s peculiar brand is therefore vested in Gender equity.

Grace Sintim-Adasi, being an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), has many of her writings on the ecclesia and women in ministry and church leadership which are probably based on her own experiences and experiences of others with whom she can directly relate. Having spent much of her working life in academia and educational institutions, it is no surprise that her writings are also situated in that context, especially in relation to the challenges women in the field of academia and scholarship face in navigating the corridors of leadership.

In the next sections, we will investigate the sources from which Sintim-Adasi has made her arguments as well as the approaches she has used to make those arguments. After this, we will sample her main arguments, reading from various publications she has produced concerning women in both church leadership and academia.

## **Sources and Approaches used to arrive at main arguments**

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) initiated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and other concerned women of her time and inaugurated in 1989, encouraged African women to write their own stories, that is, stories about women, told by women from women’s own contexts and perspectives. As Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler notes, “one of the concerns for organizing the Circle was that there were few books in the academic arena of theology that were written by women” (Fiedler, 2017:132). The aim was to help to include the stories, contributions and perspectives of women in scholarship in a patriarchal system where the contributions of women in societal or religious development had been washed over and where women were assigned roles which did not bring women to their full potential as persons.

Again, The Circle seeks to tell the stories of African women in the language of African women so that such stories will not be told through

the interpretation of others, especially Westerners. This follows the idea that a Western interpretation of the cultural context of Africa will be inaccurate at best. The Circle, in its research and publications, seeks to make space in religions and culture for the liberation of women. In Oduyoye's words, quoted by Carrie Pemberton, "what we are doing in the Circle is to see how the supportive elements which we have in the Traditional Religion and the supportive elements which we have in Christianity can support one another to support our life" (Pemberton, 2003:60). The Circle has historically done this by honoring the broad womanist and feminist traditions but leaning towards a contextual theology.

In line with the way the Circle has traditionally written, Sintim-Adasi's writings are based on stories of women. As such we find that case studies and the experiences of women inform her work greatly. Sintim-Adasi's writing therefore has many oral sources as can be seen especially in her work, "Multiple Roles of African Women Leaders and Their Challenges: The Case of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana" (Sintim-Adasi, 2014). She has also noted in her writings that literature on the role of women in religion is not difficult to find, "however most of the literature have been mainly Eurocentric. What exist locally in Ghana ...are not written by women but mainly by men" (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:4). This is a main motivation for writing especially her book on Gender and Change.

Again, Adasi's writings have been in the broad context of the Feminist and womanist traditions of the West and African-America. She has drawn from scholars like Letty Mandeville Russell, Sue Morgan, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Elizabeth Gossmann in her engagement with theological writing. But as Pemberton (2003:160) notes, "[t]he point of departure from Western feminist discourse for Circle writers was the rejection of the hegemony of white bourgeois culture of which those feminists were a part". The idea is that, African women's experiences are uniquely African and therefore, African women's stories must be told with African culture and traditions in mind. As Feidler puts it, "since Circle women are African, Circle theologies have an African slant." (2017:23). Sintim-Adasi tells the stories of African women in the context of Ghana.

Sintim-Adasi has used gender theory through historical lenses in many of her writings. In her book, *Gender and Change* (Sintim-Adasi,

2016), locates the roles and challenges of ordained women in the PCG within the history of missionary women in the church. She has also employed the theory of complement, again through historical analysis in other research and writing. For example, in her paper “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana”, she argues that whereas in the past, structures tended to focus on men, within existing structures, roles of women and men in higher educational institutions intersected.

In general, her writings can be situated broadly within the context of the work of third study commission formed by The Circle during the 1996 Convocation (Fiedler, 2017:139). This third commission focused on theological education and had among other goals, “the goal to trace contributions women have made and their challenges to ministry” (Fiedler, 2017:144). This is the focus of Sintim-Adasi’s writing following her recommendations, notably in her book, *Gender and Change*, on how training institutions and seminaries can improve women’s enrolment and accommodation. In the light of other writings that she has put out in the contexts of high education institutions, we can, still in an even broader sense, locate within the theological education commission’s work because it has to do with “investigating... institutions” (Fiedler, 2017:143) to see how ‘women-friendly’ they were. A paper such as “Culture and Changing Implications of Women in Contemporary Polytechnic Institutions, Ghana” investigates the cultural and institutional barriers to women performing leadership roles and how women were negotiating it.

## **Main arguments on patriarchy in religious and academic spaces**

Sintim-Adasi approaches patriarchy in four ways. This section will reflect on these ways drawing from quotes from some her writings as well as conclusions she has drawn.

- a) Ordained women and women in leadership face peculiar challenges in their functional roles due to restrictions placed on them by tradition, culture and religion.

This argument is one of the main claims of Sintim-Adasi in her theologies of liberation for women in ecclesiastical spaces and in academic spaces. She asks the questions, “why commissioned women were restricted only to the chaplaincy ministries while their male counterparts who were commissioned during the same period were not restricted to the chaplaincy ministry?” (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:78). She further suggests that due to the cultural expectations placed on women, women are expected to play many roles in addition to church or institutional leadership. This, she argues, makes it especially challenging for women in leadership unlike their male counterparts. This feeds into the gender equity argument, that there is no level playing field for men and women, and therefore, for there to be equity, the structures must compensate for women’s cultural disadvantages in juggling so many roles at once. Sintim-Adasi’s strategy has not been to conclude on what should be done but to document and expose the realities of women in leadership positions revealing the ideologies behind those realities. The reader is left to face their own complicity in the matter or imagine what can be done to mitigate the situation depending on the context of the reader.

- b) Women are restricted from leadership roles because of cultural and religious beliefs held by patriarchal societies which assigns women’s roles to the domestic domain.

Further to Sintim-Adasi’s earlier argument is that historically women have been restricted from leadership roles in the church. This did not mean that women were not assigned other roles but when it came to leadership, culturally, it was a man’s domain, women were expected to remain in the domestic domain. From Sintim-Adasi’s research interviews, it can be deduced that the many roles of women, is an argument used against women taking up leadership (Sintim-Adasi, 2015:173; Sintim-Adasi and Frempong, 2014:65). Again, even though both men and women in leadership have to negotiate the difficult terrain of combining home, family and leadership roles outside the home, women have a more difficult task because of the expectations placed on them within the domestic domain whereas their husbands are free to choose whether to assist or not. (Sintim-Adasi and Frempong, 2014:64-66). Again, in church circles especially, whereas the role of the wife of a minister is defined



through long tradition of missionary wives as helpers (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:26), the role of the husband of the minister is not defined. The man wields the authority in the home as head of the home and makes it confusing in the church with the woman as minister and leader of the church. In this instance, Sintim-Adasi is pointing out the power dynamics that are at play in a male dominated world where men will do whatever it takes to hold on to power. “Relationships define the wellbeing of a community and reflects its ideologies” (Jacobs, 2007:15) hence the relationship between women and men in Sintim-Adasi’s writing can be seen to reflect the ideology of male dominance over the female, yet can this ideology be said to be for the wellbeing of the whole community? Adasi’s recommendations in her book *Gender and Change*, which is replete with seminars to change the perception of congregants towards ordained women, seminars to improve the self-confidence of boys and girls at an early age to appreciate that they can do what other humans can do, and also seminars to boost confidence of women to study theology at higher levels and to be ordained (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:144-145), seem to suggest that society is not well, until such limitations are consciously and systematically removed so that both men and women can participate fully in society at their full potential.

- c) The experiences and contributions of women in general and ordained women specifically are woefully underrepresented in the available literature.

Sintim-Adasi makes this challenge clear as she strives to put together oral interviews, and scraps of data available to make data on women’s contribution to the growth of the church in Ghana, particularly the Presbyterian Church of Ghana accessible. She presents a historical sketch of the contributions of women to the development and growth of the PCG from the time of the missionaries, a fact which she says is conspicuously missing from the history as is usually presented by the church. “The records have consistently displayed a certain pattern: the omission of the contributions of women to the establishment of the PCG’s mission in Ghana. These omissions should not be taken as an oversight. Rather it reflects the general attitude towards women and their contribution in the church (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:6, see also 27). She hints in her writing that, women

in leadership, is not new in traditional African settings as women were leaders in politics and socio-economic spheres. She argues that, these omissions notwithstanding, women have continued to play their part in church leadership and development, and documents the persistence of some women and the advocacy that has led to successes in present times where women in the church, particularly the PCG, can now be ordained and women in academia can take up leadership positions.

- d) Current trends suggest that women are breaking the boundaries placed on them by patriarchal culture and religion.

The conclusions Sintim-Adasi draws in her research are testimony to the resilience of African women in the face of such inequity in the church and academy. A typical conclusion is:

The women discussed in this work have demonstrated their enterprising capabilities beyond the acknowledged physical boundaries of the Polytechnic. They have penetrated profoundly into the educational domain and challenged the prejudices of the arguments against their roles, testified that there lies an inert dynamism in women which, when given the appropriate recognition, would rekindle and be employed for the benefit of mankind in other dimensions (Sintim-Adasi, 2015:173)

This suggest that women have much more to contribute to growth and development of institutions such as the church and academy if barriers and restrictions continue to be broken down or were completely removed from their path. Sintim-Adasi would have us continue to tell the stories of the women who have found ways to resist the barriers so that their stories will be out there to show that yes, women can (in President Obama's words). She shows that women have helped to advance the mission of institutions in which they have served not just by performing roles traditionally assigned to them but through the performance of significant leadership roles. This indicates that, it is not a universal truth that the place of the African woman is in the domestic domain or that women lack specific skills or gifts set to be in leadership and those arguments can no longer hold as basis for confining women to background roles.

## Conclusion and way forward

Liberating ecclesia is surely not over, it remains a continuing task that we must continue to engage in. As long as the church remains a human institution, the ethical struggle must continue. Once the task of sanctification is not complete, there will always be ways improve relationship dynamics. The history must continue to be written so that as we measure what was with what is now, and we can continue to re-imagine what can be still.

In calling out institutions like the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, on its tendency to give prominence to male ministers over female ministers, Sintim-Adasi is certainly engaged in a 'theology of resistance' to a system and a history gone wrong in the understanding of gender theory. Perhaps being part of the marginalized group in this situation, Sintim-Adasi may be in a vulnerable place and it may be the reason for the exercise of caution that is detected in her writings. For example, in her recommendations in her book (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:144-147), the language is mainly passive where it could have been direct. A quote here, "[i]t is our recommendation that equal posting opportunities be made available to all ministers without discrimination on the grounds of gender" (Sintim-Adasi, 2016:146) is an example of what could have been stated in more active terms and directed at the intended subject. This can also be detected in her research from the higher educational institutions where she worked as well. For example, a statement like, "From our findings, we are convinced that, it is worthwhile for women at the Polytechnic to be given equal roles in decision making positions" (Baffoe, Sintim-Adasi and Ansaah, 2014:65), in the concluding remarks could have been stated more actively. Perhaps, in this regard, Pemberton is not far from right when she claims that, "[t]he writings of the Circle constitute nothing less than a brave 'will to write', and announce a reconstruction of African theology on women's terms. In this reconstruction there are numerous tensions which surface both in text and encounter, and which have not been addressed in a sustained critical manner by the Circle" (2003:160). It may be about time as we 'return home' to Ghana in 2024, to re-look at these tensions and make it a focus for consultation and scholarship.

Mignon Jacobs (2017) writes that “the assumption that the problematic aspects of female-male dynamics in the private and public domains have been resolved by including women in aspects of decision making and leadership is challenged by the continuing struggles to achieve, maintain, and advance equitable relationships between men and women.” Grace Sintim-Adasi’s exposure of the struggles of women to attain to decision making and leadership in church and academy, and her conclusions that boundaries are being broken must only lend credence to the fact that a persistent theology of liberation brings results. This realization should lead to a continuous calling out to systems and structures that resist equity.

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# 15 | AFRICAN FEMINISTS' TRAJECTORIES AS REFLECTED IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONTEMPLATIONS OF CELESTINA OMOSO ISIRAMEN

*Esther Ojone Joseph*

## **Abstract**

Global accentuations have placed feminist agitations on the front burner in various climes. In this regard, African feminists have carved a niche for re-reading and re-interpreting the cultural and religious perception of African women, as a distinct enterprise. Within this space, Professor Isiramen evolves some philosophical-theological propositions in her logical discourses on the authentic humanization of African women. The paper interrogates Isiramen's unique penning as an African feminist philosopher. This study relies on answers to the following questions: (1) What are the cultural/religious practices that inspire her studies? (2) What are the ingredients that make up her philosophical-theological propositions for the liberation of African women? (3) How did she galvanize her philosophical-theological propositions into a unique model for African women liberation? The responses to these quizzes and more provide the necessary justification for flaunting Celestina Omoso Isiramen as an astute African Philosopher in the vanguard of African feminist theologians.

**Keywords:** African women, Celestina Isiramen, Christocentric humanization, Cultural-religious beliefs, Feminist theology and Philosophical-theological

## **Introduction**

Studies have shown that cultural and religious imperatives constitute hindrances to the flourishing of the girl-child in different climes. The quest for redress has generated numerous ideologies, identifiable as the traditional feminist stance, the liberal feminist stance and the radical feminist stance (Backstone, 1975:243). These have again polarized into African feminism and Western feminism. As an African feminist, Celestina Isiramen has carved a niche for herself as a philosopher of religion

and has, (in the course of time), propounded some philosophical-theological theories towards the emancipation of women. In x-raying Isiramen's contributions to African feminists' compendiums, this paper notes her several theoretical models but intends to elucidate her Christocentric humanization theoretical framework in order to project her as an astute African feminist matriarch.

## **Brief Biography of Prof. Celestina Omoso Isiramen**

Celestina Isiramen is a Professor of Philosophy of Religion of eighteen (18) years standing, having obtained her professorial chair in 2004. She is a lecturer at the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma Nigeria. She had her first degree in Religious Studies Education from the University of Benin, Nigeria in 1985, her Master's degree in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Ibadan in 1987 and acquired her PhD in Philosophy of religion in 1994 from Edo State University (Now Ambrose Alli University), Ekpoma, Nigeria. Celestina Isiramen is prolific, well published nationally and internationally. She has attended several national and international conferences and presented quality scholarly papers.

Apart from being a seasoned academic, Isiramen has held several administrative positions, and recorded several achievements, which unveil her as a trailblazer. For instance, she was the Senior Prefect (Head Girl), Edokpolo Grammar School, Benin City (1978-1979). She was the best graduating student from the Faculty of Education, University of Benin (Abraka Campus), 1985/1986 session. She is the first female Professor, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, first and only female Professor, Department of Religious Management and Cultural Studies, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma to date. She was Director, General Studies Division, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 2001-2004. She is the only female to have served in that capacity to date. She was the Director, University Consultancy Unit, 2006-2009, 2011-2014 and the only female to have served in that capacity to date. She is a two-time Senate elected member to the University Governing Council, 2001-2004, 2005-2009 and the only female to have served as elected member of Council

from Senate so far. She was the Dean, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 2014-2016 and the only female to have served in that capacity till now, to mention just a few.

She is the maiden Chairman, Board of Governors, Institute of Theological Studies, Uromi Diocese, Nigeria, 2010 – date; she is also the maiden Chairman, Board of Governors, Ufua Memorial Catholic Education Centre, Uromi, Nigeria, 2018-date. Isiramen belongs to several National and International academic bodies. She is a member of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians. She was the Nigerian South-South Zonal Coordinator of the Circle in 2010. She is a member of World Philosophical Congress, International Federation of Philosophical Societies and National Association for Women Academics. She is also a member of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religions, African Association for the Study of Religions and the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR), among others. She was a member of the National Committee on Inter-religious Dialogue, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2013-2016.

Isiramen passed with distinction from the specialized Capacity building Training in Higher Education (VICBHE), 2021. She also received training in Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI-Africa), African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and passed with Distinction as a Global Certified University Accreditor, 2021. She is a recipient of several awards and certificates (academic, spiritual and cultural). Isiramen is a Lady of the Order of the Knight of St. Mulumba (LSM), of the Catholic denomination. She has presented several public lectures and presented her Inaugural Lecture in 2014. Celestina Isiramen is married with children (Isiramen, 2022:1-20).

## **The Motivating Background to the Feminist Research of Celestina Isiramen**

Apart from being a natural advocate for fairness and justice, Isiramen's alignment with the feminist liberation campaigns stems from the circumstances that surrounded her birth and family background. The events expose the hazardous ecosystem to which an African daughter is born. Briefly, Isiramen hails from a polygamous family. Her late father



had five wives with 24 children, where she numbered as the 23rd child. The news of her birth as the 4th daughter of her mother, after 3 daughters, where other wives had male children was received by her late mother with tears. The pain of another female child was overwhelming.

Her mother separated from her father when the family took the decision that only boy-children would qualify for formal education. Since she had no son that would benefit from the largesse, she moved out of marriage and became a single mother. Her mother took up the challenge, worked hard and trained all her daughters up to the University level. Today, Isiramen is the only Professor out of the 24 children of her late father.

According to Isiramen, she grew up to appreciate her mother's resilience and enviable successes and understood that success is not gender biased but resides in hard work and self-determination. Having surmounted the patriarchal hurdles of the family, Isiramen became intolerant with all forms of discrimination against women. She concluded that discrimination against people is a crime against "humanity and God". Thus, in her contributions to feminist trajectories, Isiramen clearly made the point that "womanhood is not a handicap but an endowment" (Isiramen, 2014:13).

## **Isiramen's Discoveries on Male chauvinism and Women's Maltreatment in Africa**

- *The Inseparability between Religion and Culture in Africa*

Isiramen notes that in Africa, culture and religion are inseparable in the attempt to delineate the suppression of women. She says:

It behooves us to understand that...it is impossible to talk about the subjugation of women without referring to religion. The point becomes glaring in Africa to which Nigeria belongs. The culture of Africans is their religion and their religion is their culture (Isiramen, 2005:247).

Isiramen concludes that religion provides the spiritual anchor for every cultural precept on the girl-child in Africa (Isiramen, 2014:6).

• *The Cultural/Religious Perception of the Girl-Child*

Isiramen in 6 Ds\*, summarizes the cultural cum religious predicament of the girl-child in Africa. It begins with “disaffection at birth, then degradation as a child, then disintegration at girlhood, then dehumanization as a wife, then dispossession at widowhood and ends in miserable death” (Isiramen, 2002:20-31). Thus, the girl-child is born into an imperiled ecosystem armed with patriarchal thorns which choke every of her aspiration from birth to death.

**\*6 Ds**

1. Disaffection at birth: the perception of the girl – baby as “half current”, who cannot provide “Certificate of Occupancy” for her mother and preserve the family name of her father.
2. Degradation: refers to the deliberate reduction of the worth of the girl-child in relation to the boy-child.
3. Disintegration: refers to the cultural/religious curtailment of the strengths and capabilities of the girl child through stereotyping.
4. Dehumanization: refers to the treatment of wives as mere objects of sexual satisfaction, battery and the like.
5. Dispossession: the perception that widows and even women are not entitled to property inheritance.
6. Miserable death: refers to the overbearing circumstance that eventually result in women dying crestfallen, dejected, broken hearted, desolate, depressed, disconsolate and wretched.

Isiramen concludes that women were educationally disadvantaged, politically irrelevant, subjected to domestic violence, treated as mere objects, dispossessed, exposed to deadly diseases and suffered under inhuman widowhood rites at the death of their husbands. Women were falsely accused of demonic possessions and the cause of their husband’s misfortunes (Isiramen, 1997:6a; 2003:29; 2014:18-19). It was deadly for a woman to beget only female children and hellish without children and absolute misery trailed her earthly exit (Isiramen, 2014:5).

## The Narratives in Modern Times

Isiramen notes some elements of social change for the girl-child in modern times. For instance, the practice of giving out a girl-child in marriage without her consent has dwindled. Female children are now competing successfully with male children in outdoor activities. They can also choose careers according to their capabilities and sex stereotyping is gradually eroding (Isiramen, 1997:12a). Isiramen (2003:1a) is however, dismayed that in this century, African women are still battling with severe marginalization. They are included as token representations in governance who only occupy the second fiddle's position (Isiramen, 1997:15a). She laments that although many African countries have acceded to international and national treaties on the eradication of injustices against women, these unwholesome practices have continued to plague the genuine existence of women, escalating from the agonizing to the inexpressible. It is against this background, that the unrelenting campaigns by feminists can be properly, visualized.

## Feminist Agitations

Isiramen x-rays the development of feminist agitations and explains that scholars have advanced varied stances. These viewpoints are explainable in three conceptual frameworks (Blackstone, 1975:243; Isiramen 1997:26).

The first framework is the Traditional stance, which avers that the traditional requirements for women are in order and necessary for social cohesion. Within this perspective, women are required to accept their position as inferior to men. Summarily, the traditionalist posits thus: "Labour determined by sex differences, stereotyping of sex and the restrictions of female in opportunities and roles are not forms of oppression but the fulfillment of the nature of women; a necessity for family and societal cohesion" (Maynard, 1995:259-281). The second framework is the liberal standpoint, which insists, contrary to the above, that the stereotyping of sex roles is a social injustice. It explains that the rights of women in "social, legal and political spheres should be respected" (Maynard, 1995:259-281). The liberalist advocates that the marginalization of women is unjustifiable. Thus Blackstone (1974:243) says:

If the differences between men and women are such that prevent women from fulfilling certain roles or from performing certain roles, well then, discrimination between sexes may be justified, but the absence of such constraints mean that discrimination between sexes is unjust.

This stance emphasizes that the worth of women should be valued against the background of their abilities and outputs. The liberal does not condemn all traditional sex roles nor request the abolition of all traditional family values, but insists on the modifications of societal practices as a leeway for justice and fairness.

The third framework is the radical feminist stance, which advocates, “Complete revolution of the system and not mere reform”. To the radical feminist, child bearing creates weakness on women and makes them to be dependent while men remain dominant, resulting in oppression. The radical feminist calls for the total abolishment of biological differences through the aid of technology (Blackstone, 1974:243). Contraception and “artificial reproduction” should replace biological means of procreation. This would set women free from biological inequalities and sex classification. The radical feminist canvasses the stoppage of the entire sex role system (including child bearing), marriage and the family structure. It calls for freedom from “sexual classification... rather than mere equalization of sex roles” (Firestone, 1997:684).

Isiramen concludes from the foregoing that there is no consensus among feminist agitators on what freedom means for women and the means for attaining it. She warned against the employment of feminist strategies that could jeopardize the authentic aims of the struggles (Isiramen, 1997:243b). She contends that while the traditional stance is humanly and logically unrealistic for the flourishing of the girl-child, the radical stance is unfeasible, especially as many women are desirous of experiencing marriage and the biological processes of child bearing. Isiramen therefore, aligned with the liberal stance and propounded some liberation theories in the full gamut of philosophical-theological theoretical framework.

## Philosophical-Theological Models of Celestina Isiramen

Over the years, Isiramen has propounded some philosophical-theological theories as bases for making logical conclusions for authentic humanization of women. A careful examination of these theories, project Isiramen as a feminist whose thoughts on women liberation generate from logical calculations above superficial reasoning. This paper shall highlight some of these theories briefly and deeply x-ray her Christocentric humanization theory propounded in 2014 as its working model.

In 1997, Isiramen propounded the theory of Genuine Human Realization in canvassing the flourishing of the authentic dignity of the Nigerian woman by advocating an objective synthesis of aspects of culture/religion and modernity for the institution of egalitarianism in human societies. She emphasized that “the wrongness or rightness of all human acts should be valued from the perspective of human actualization” and not sex (Isiramen, 1997:10b). In 2003, she propounded the Survival Paradigm and emphasized the quest for the survival of women as a definition for their liberation. She recommended the logical re-reading of scriptures, and the humane selection of aspects of culture in the quest for the authentic survival of women (Isiramen, 2003:31-42b). In 2021, she propounded the Functionality-Empirical model through which she advanced that women’s capabilities portray their practical functionality and not sex (Isiramen, 2021:125-134).

The theory of **Christocentric** humanization crystallizes the crux of Isiramen’s thoughts on the emancipation of women. The theory focuses on the development of the human personhood as it relates to every human life, in recognition of human uniqueness. **Christocentrism** in this context implies “an ideology derived from the teachings of Christianity”. This theory anchors on faith and logic (Isiramen, 2014:16). Christocentric humanization therefore, emphasizes the humanization of women in line with the egalitarian reinterpretation of the teachings of Christianity and the adoption of valuable aspects of culture for the emancipation of women.

Isiramen explicates that the gift of humanity is divine. This means that it is not within the human power to choose to be human because

human beings are human by God's choice. It is however, within the human power, she says, to either frustrate or actualize this God-given humanity through choices that they make. Such choices can either frustrate their God-given humanity (thereby reducing humanity to the lowest ebb) or make human qualities to flourish as designed by the Creator. Human actualization is therefore, determined by wise humane choices and its degradation by foolish inhumane choices (Isiramen, 2014:274).

In this context, Isiramen interprets the full import of being human by relying on Christian ideologies, the teachings of biological sciences, psychology and philosophical thoughts on what humanity means. She explains further that the choice of human actions must go above general societal practices (cultural relativism) and one's own proclivity (subjectivism). Thus, Isiramen prescribes the intelligent choice of human actions for the actualization of the humanness of persons in seeking concrete behaviour that can lead to the achievement of genuine human goals (Isiramen, 1997:230). This is in line with the view of Ashley thus: "the determination of these goals do not find fulfillment in individual preferences (subjectivism) nor the custom of a particular culture (relativism) but on the true nature of the human person..." (Ashley, 1978:174). This theory of humanness provides a coherent framework for the authentic liberation of women in Africa (Isiramen, 2014:22).

### **Isiramen's Application of her Philosophical-Theological Model**

Isiramen galvanized the application of her theoretical framework by answering the following questions:

- i. Who is a woman?
- ii. What is the purpose of the woman on earth?
- iii. What is the faith of the woman in the hereafter? (Isiramen, 2014)

In answering the question who is a woman? Isiramen employed the explanations of the sciences, philosophical thoughts and theological reflections on the woman, in relation to the man. She dispensed with the definition of biological sciences that the woman "belongs to the sex which

conceives and gives birth to young ones or (in a wider sense) which produces ova..." (Biology Online 2014). She further explained that the constituents of the chromosomes define the woman to be essentially unique by her genetic make-up. The genetic theory explains that the difference between a man and a woman is in their chromosomes of X and Y. Lucas (1973:112) explains that: "Two X chromosomes exist in the cells of human females and these distinguish them from the human males with each cell having one X chromosome and one Y chromosome." Isiramen deduced from the above that both females and males are human beings who are only different by their genetic make-up. This difference does not input any constraints on the woman. Rather, it is a unique feminine endowment.

Psychologically, Isiramen points out that:

A woman's psyche, soul, spirit and conscience are only different from that of a man (not inferior) in the sense that while women enhance objective knowledge through intuition; seeing things in an inclusive context of the other pressures surrounding issues, rather than judging them on a rigid scale, men hastily assess issues by rigid dispassionate methods. (see Isiramen, 1997:239; Malley, 2001:54).

This psychological definition only distinguishes the woman from the man. This difference is again not a constraint. According to Isiramen, it only shows that despite the differences between males and females, "biology and psychology are in agreement that they are both human beings". (Isiramen, 2014:20).

She explains further that, philosophically, women and men are equal in capabilities. For instance, Nietzsche states that "...meditating on things...is one of the means" by which humans can ease the burden of life and that through a proper exercise of this act of meditation, one can secure the concrete reality at difficult times (Academy of Ideas, 2014:1). Thus, human awareness provides relevance for humanity. Every human being is capable of what he termed "psychological observations" and the insight to analytic perception of various ideas. This human capability is not a preserve of men. It is an endowment for all humans. For Karl Marx, "all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature." History is all about the creation of all humans (women inclusive)

as a product of work done (Karl Marx in Erich Fromm, 2014:1). In addition, Plato generalizes the origin of human morality when he stated that “for all good and evil... originates in the soul and overflows from thence, as from the head into the eyes” (Plato in AZQUOTES, 2014:1). Plato, thus, did not provide a differential morality for women and men.

Isiramen buttressed the above views by the teachings of the Bible, which explain the creation of the woman thus: “The creation of the woman as recorded in Genesis 2:21-23 explains that while the man was created from sand, the woman was privileged to have been created from the rib of the man. Thus, the man is mere sand while the woman is the refined man (Isiramen, 2014:30).” The teachings of Christ also show that womanhood is not a constraint. Jesus’ teaching was a deviation from the customarily entrenched prejudice against women of his time, when women were valued as “second class citizens”. Jesus taught: “...at the beginning, the Creator made them, male and female” (Matt. 19:14). In the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he gave women a pride of place. In Matt. 15:28, he praised the faith of the Canaanite woman, in John 11:26-27, he also praised the faith of Martha. He identified freely with women in public, contrary to the custom of the Jews (John 8:10-11). Jesus gave women and men equal intrinsic value and treated women as human beings for whom he came. Thus, he talked about salvation freely and publicly to the Samaritan woman at the Sychar well (John 4:7-26) and spoke publicly with the woman accused of adultery (John 8:10-11) among others. To Isiramen, the above explanations of who the woman is uphold that the woman is not in any way inferior to the man and that both are human beings as taught by the theory of “Universal Humanity” (Megan, 2019:1).

In explaining the purpose of the woman on earth, Isiramen avers that one of the most fundamental needs of humans is to have purpose for existence. Isiramen buttressed the above with the psychological thoughts of Schippers and Ziegler (2013:1). To them, human purpose on earth begins with the ability to understand one’s intrinsic values and goals and the best possible ways of attaining them. This is a human capability, which does not depend on sex (Isiramen, 2014:25). She expatiated further with the view of Plato the philosopher that asserts that human pursuit of the highest form of knowledge is the “form” of the Good, from which all



other goods “derive their utility and value” and that this summarizes the ultimate meaning of life (Plato in AZQUOTES, 2013). In addition, Epicurus taught: “the most pleasant life” is that in which human beings shun unimportant desires and attain inner serenity (Epicurus 2014). Isiramen concludes that, the attainment of such tranquility is human and not sex biased.

Buttressing the above, Christianity, according to Isiramen, teaches that the “search for salvation through the grace of God (John 11:26) is the human purpose on earth. *Westminster shorter Catechism* Quotes (2013), states that the purpose of human beings on earth is to “...glorify God and enjoy him forever” Christians are to obey the golden rule as spelt out in Matthew 7:12 thus: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...” Similarly, the *Baltimore Catechism* (2013:1) questioned; “why did God make you?” and answers thus: “God made me to know him, to love him and serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in heaven”. Isiramen deciphered from the above, that the ultimate purpose of a woman on earth is to prudentially, align with genuine acts. It hinges on responsible choices of “good, virtue, hard work, determination, obedience to divine commands and giving all up for God”.

Responding to the questions, what is the Faith of the Woman in the Hereafter? Isiramen explained that biology and psychology do not provide information about life after death. However, she says, philosophy provides some answers. Thus, Plato concludes, “the soul is immortal and therefore survives the death of the body” (Plato in Ivy panda, 2021). Furthermore, Aquinas’ teaching about after life is that the human soul is “immortal and exist in afterlife. The lot of the soul in afterlife depends on its deeds in its earthly existence (Aquinas in Cambridge Core, 2021:2).

Theologically, Isiramen (2014:30) explains that Christian eschatology is concerned with “death, judgment and the ultimate confirmation of God’s purposes.” The “concepts of eternal bliss in heaven and eternal damnation in hell” are tenets or Christian teachings about afterlife. The attainment of heaven or hell according to Christian teachings depends on obedience to the Ten Commandments and not on sex. Thus, Christianity does not teach a differential eschatology for women and men. The fate of the soul of a person depends on the person’s actions while alive, culminating in the condition of the soul at death.

As reflected above, Isiramen relied on biological, psychological, philosophical analyses and theological reflections to arrive at a logical conclusion that being a woman is not an albatross. She aligned with the liberal feminist in advancing, among others, the Christocentric humanization model through which she emphasized that for the proper development of humans and the society, wresting women from all forms of dehumanization is a panacea.

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

So far, this paper has espoused Isiramen's treatises on the need for the humanization of women by the application of wise humane choices. She notes that the issues regarding the maltreatment of women in Africa could not be underplayed. She also draws attention to the rise of feminist groups as a response to the awareness of the unacceptable injustices meted out on women and warns that the variant and diversified views on what constitute liberation for women and the means to attaining it portend grave hindrances to the struggles. She also noted some positive changes in the feminist narratives in modern times, but lamented that the maltreatment of women in many African communities has not abated, despite the enormous agitations by feminists and the fact that governments have globally acceded to several egalitarian treaties. Isiramen submits that from all analyses, being a female is neither a constraint nor an albatross. Therefore, discrimination against women is tantamount to human's inhumanity to human. Thus, she invariably, warns against truncating the potentials of women in any guise.

She garnered insight from diverse fields of knowledge and provides a logical basis for the egalitarian re-reading of the bible and judicious modification of our cultural life-styles through her Christocentric humanization framework. These, she says will provide for all persons (men and women) ways to rediscover the richness of the teachings of the Bible and authentic cultural values which would be the bedrock for eschewing male chauvinism from human societies. Isiramen's ideologies and insightful scholarly presentations, justify our conclusion that she is an astute African feminist matriarch. Her writings show feminists' trajectories as an enterprise that is not amenable to scholastic constraints. Her conclusions

hinge on several fields of study, which she contextualized into her philosophical-theological thoughts.

This paper concludes by stating the facts that the pioneers of African feminism have through frantic efforts won battles against the degradation of African women largely. This momentum must not quench. It is therefore, not discomfited to conclude by thrusting younger African feminist scholars to emulate feminists of the likes of Isiramen whose thoughts are capable of instigating critical feminist researches. The paper advises readers to read Isiramen's writings between the lines in order to discover its abundant invaluable treasures. These treasures heighten the indices that Professor Celestina Isiramen is an African philosophical-theological feminist matriarch of no mean repute.

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## 16 | OYERONKE OLADEMO'S FEMINIST CIRCLES

*Lydia Bosede Akande*

### **Abstract**

One of the matriarchs of feminist literature is Oyeronke Olademo, a Professor of Comparative Religious Studies. The methods and theories of liberation she has projected over the decades are worthy of study. This paper will examine among other factors, the contexts that informed her work and the sources she used to elaborate her theories of liberation. It will examine the feminist thrust of Oyeronke Olademo as a voice that has advocated women's contributions and advances in the area of religion. The approach used in this work is feminist liberation theology, while the methods are historical, descriptive, and qualitative. A cursory observation of her major works indicates that her focus is in the area of women's leadership roles in a male-dominated environment, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora. Her perception of the leadership role of women across the various strata of human existence is therefore worthy of mention. This work concludes by identifying Oyeronke's efforts at advancing the role of women both in Africa and beyond. The work recommends that more work is needed from other scholars to continue in her steps at making the voice of the matriarchs heard in high places.

**Keywords:** Oyeronke Olademo, Feminism, African Religion, Christianity, Matriarchs.

### **Introduction**

The contributions of women in every facet of life have become an important subject today. Despite specific challenges that certain cultures have inflicted on them, their voices in politics, religion, education, and other spheres of life can be distinctly and positively felt. Women theologians and scholars have also added their voices in showcasing the values of African women and correcting wrong biblical interpretations. Notable among these African women theologians whose contributions to uplifting the status of African women, especially in academics and religious circles are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian who has made

significant contributions to African women's theology. She is the founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which was established in 1989 and aims to promote the study and research of African women's theology. Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere is a Nigerian theologian who has also contributed significantly to African women's theology. Her work focuses on gender issues and biblical interpretation, and has published several articles and books on these topics. Oyeronke Olademo is a Nigerian theologian whose publications extensively centre on African women's theology, including works on the role of women in the African church and the intersection of gender and religion in Africa. Seyram Amenyedzi is a Ghanaian theologian who has written on the topic of women's leadership in the African church and the role of African women in theology. Lydia Akande is a Nigerian theologian who has published on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, *Nigerian Women and National Development*, including the intersection of Christianity and traditional African religions.

As for additional notable names in African women's theology, there are indeed many other prominent figures in the field. Some of these include: Musimbi Kanyoro, a Kenyan theologian and activist who has written on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, and had served as the General Secretary of the World YWCA from 2007 to 2016. Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Malawian theologian has also written extensively on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, and currently the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. Funmi Para-Mallam, a Nigerian theologian, has similarly written on the topic of women's leadership in the African church, and presently serves as the Regional Secretary for West Africa for the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa.

Mercy A. Oduoye, as mentioned above, also deserves to be included in this list as she is one of the women, having realized the oppression meted on women in religious and academic circles, gathered some African women to correct the wrong notion in 1989. It was reported in *Sankofa 2024 Call for Papers*, that, the gathering was launched “with a clear agenda for women to research, read, interpret, write, and publish in the area of cultural/religious texts for the liberation and empowerment

of women in particular and the whole earth community". Her contributions therefore in the history of African Women Liberation Theology cannot be forgotten. Her efforts to a large extent have impacted positively women in religion and academia, and today some women have occupied and are still occupying leadership positions in faith circles. Some of them are heads of academic Departments of Religious Studies. For instance, Professor Oyeronke Olademo was a former Head of the Department of Religions at, the University of Ilorin, and the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, at the same University. Dr. Lydia Akande, was the Head of the Department of Christian Religious Studies, at Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, from 2005 to 2006, Professor Peju Bashua served as the Head of the Department of Religions and Peace Studies, at Lagos State University, from 2020 to 2022. Church founders are usually the prerogatives of the male; contemporary women have also excelled. For instance, in the words of Akande (2004:85):

Today, we have some women in history who through the help of the Holy Spirit founded Churches. For example, the genesis of the Christ Apostolic Church (worldwide), CAC, could be traced to a woman called Miss Sophia Odulami. Other examples are Mrs. Aimila, who founded Christ the Messiah Church, and Mrs. Bola Odeleke founded Agbala Olorun kiibati ministry, a Christ Apostolic Church with Branches in Lagos and Ibadan (Akande, 2004:85).

Similarly, in gospel song ministrations, women are not left; gospel musicians include, Tope Alabi, Esther Igbekele, Bisi Alawiye Aluko, Adeyinka Alaseyori, and others. However, this chapter focuses on and examines the works of Oyeronke Olademo, an accomplished female scholar and theologian. She is one whose works, and motherly advice have greatly impacted positively on other women folks. Some of her academic and theological thrusts which aimed at advancing the leadership role of women in male-dominated environments both in Nigeria and the diaspora formed the basis of this chapter. Her reasons for this among others as stated in one of her works is that "Gender equality is a progress for all, and the key to sustainable development" (Olademo, 2017:175).



## Short Biography of Professor Oyeronke Olademo

Writing the biography of Professor Oyeronke Olademo, a renowned, accomplished scholar and female theologian is a great honour and privilege. A former head, of the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and presently, the Director, of Center for Peace, University of Ilorin, is the firstborn of the royal family of Oyedeji, Ilé-Aniyùn compound in Ikire, the headquarters of Irewole Local Government Area of Osun State. She was born about 60 years ago. Her academic pursuit spanned through Primary, Secondary, Higher School, and University between 1969 and 1997 respectively. She attended Ijeru Baptist Day School, Ogbomoso (1969-1974); Baptist Girls' High School, Osogbo (1975-1980); Olivet Heights, Oyo (1980-1982); and the University of Ilorin (1982-1985, 1990-1991, 1992-1997).

Professor Oyeronke Olademo did her mandatory one-year National Youth Service Corps at the Institute of Ecumenical Education, Enugu, from 1985 to 1986. She became an academic staff of the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, in 1991 as an Assistant lecturer. From there, through hard work and dedication rose through the ranks to become a Professor of Comparative Religious Studies in 2011, being the first female Professor in that specialization in Nigeria. She has enjoyed international fellowships and attended several academic conferences locally, nationally, and internationally. Additionally, Professor Olademo is an astute academic, an external examiner to a good number of universities at undergraduate and postgraduate positions, and as well assessed several professorial candidates.

To date as a Professor in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, and the Director of, the Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies of the University, she is a committed lecturer, researcher, and administrator per excellence, whose vision and mission for the total wellbeing of women generally in all spheres of life cannot be overemphasized. As a committed and contemporary researcher, she has to her credit over seventy publications as books, articles in journals of repute, and considerable chapters in Books. Some of her works include *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Olajubu, 2003), *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*

(Olademo, 2009), *Women and New and Africana Religions* (Ashcraft-Eason, Martin and Olademo, 2010), *The Church, Society and Nation Building* (Falako, Olademo and Oladunjoye, 2015), *Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa* (Ogungbile and Olademo, 2020), and *Women in Yoruba Religions* (Oládémọ, 2022)

## Theoretical Framework

For this work, the main theory adopted is feminism which forms the major frame upon which a very large percentage of Oyeronke Olademo's works are built as would be examined in this study. It thus becomes very germane to discuss what feminism is and its types. The term means different things to different people. But for this work, feminism is a philosophy that advocates equal rights for women and men socially, politically, economically, and religiously. Feminism is not about being proud or arrogant, it is a call for women today to rise and fight for their God-ordained rights as given to mankind. In the words of Mendus; "Feminism was originally a positive movement, focused on giving women the basic rights God intends for every human being to have" (Mendus, 2005). Therefore from the religious perspective, the role of feminist theology among others includes increasing the role of women among the clergy and religious authorities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women's place in career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts (Ariffin, 1997). In light of this, and from the perspective of Christian feminism, the woman is expected to obey God, walking in peace and grace, and as well remember that she has free access to spiritual blessings in God, as stated in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"

Feminism as a discipline is divided into five main types. They are; Liberal feminism, Radical, Marxist and Socialist, Cultural and Eco Feminism. For this work, liberal feminism shall be looked at and defined because it is from this angle that Oyeronke Olademo's works are based. Hence, Liberal feminism fights for equal rights for men and women through political and legal reform. Similarly, Liberal feminists strongly oppose discrimination of gender, either in the workplace or in the home, and the patriarchal mentality in inherited traditions is part of the reasons

that led to the Liberal Feminists movement. Therefore, it is from this perspective that we shall examine selected academic and theological works of Oyeronke Olademo, where she has demonstrated that “men and women should not be discriminated against based on gender unless there is a sound biological reason for different treatment” (Olademo, 2017:177). Hence, in the words of Malson:

Feminism seeks to expose male privilege which has been taken as normative and universal; to search for alternative wisdom and uncover suppressed history; to challenge prescribed roles and risk new interpretations of what constitutes appropriate roles and life experiences for women and to take deliberate actions to enlighten women about the danger of the feminine mystique which encourages women to be passive (Malson *et al.*, 1989).

From the aforementioned, it could be said that if women are not treated in a demeaning way, the world at large will enjoy the peace and harmony that God has ordained for mankind.

## **Cultural, Political, and Economic Context in Oyeronke Olademo’s Feminist Theology**

Cultural, Political, Religion, and Economic context form significant aspects of the works of Oyeronke Olademo. Culture can be defined as the ideas, customs, and behaviours of a particular set of people or society passed from one generation to another. This includes their ways of life, mode of dressing, language, and religion. In the words of James Spradley, “Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley and McCurdy, 1984). From these definitions, the following works of Olademo speak volumes about the culture of women in Africa and particularly the Yoruba-speaking race, and African diasporic women.

In this regard, the some works of Oyeronke Olademo shall be examined. In *Women and New and Africana Religions*; Oyeronke Olademo is one of the Editors. It has 5 editions published between 2009 and 2010. It is a series of thought-provoking write-ups that discussed the day-to-day diverse experiences of women from different ethnicities and nationalities through the eye lens of religion. In *Women and New and Africana Religions*:

Readers hear from women from a number of religious/spiritual persuasions around the world, including Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, South America, and North America. These voices form the core of remarkable explorations of family and environment, social and spiritual empowerment, sexuality and power, and ways in which worldview informs roles in religion and society. Each essay includes scene-setting historical and social background information and fascinating insights from renowned scholars sharing their own research and firsthand experiences with their subjects (Ashcraft-Eason, Martin and Olademo, 2010).

Similarly, in another write-up, *Women in Yoruba Religions* published in 2022, Oyeronke, exposed us to the influence of Yoruba cultures on the religious lives of women in Christianity, Islam, and the African Religion in Diaspora such as Santeria and Candomble. Despite the overwhelming challenges that Christianity and Islam posed to gender issues which have welded significant recognition to patriarchal gender roles, the resources available for women in Yoruba culture have enabled them to compete favourably with the new norms that Christianity and Islam came to offer.

Oyeronke Olademo further posits that; “Yoruba women attain and wield agency in family and society through their economic and religious roles, and Yoruba operate within a system of gender balance, so that neither of the sexes can be subsumed in the other” (Oládémọ, 2022).

Similarly, other works of Oyeronke that portray the cultural values of women include *Gender and Development in Africa and Its Diaspora*. Here, Oyeronke discusses the difficult issues that culture, religion, and ethnicity had caused to bear on the right place of gender in the development of African and African Diaspora communities. These issues form the basic mechanisms of the experiences of Africans in the Diaspora, examined and considered by researchers. In this regard, it could be said that the trademark of development in Africa and the Diaspora is the advancement of the people, and to this extent, African women have performed creditably well, as pronounced in the words of Akintan that; “women have played and are still playing prominent roles in the improvement of the society” (Akintan, 2002:13). This position contradicts the claims of Ola-Aluko and Edewor, “In all cultures, women are considered to be inferior to men. African culture, though diverse, is not an exception”(Ola-Aluko

and Edewor, 2002:13). They went further to say that; “Women are wives and mothers. They do the cooking, the mending, the sewing, and the washing. They take care of the men and are subordinate to male authority. They are largely excluded from high-status occupations and positions of power” (Ola-Aluko and Edewor, 2002).

The aforementioned views of Ola-Aluko and Edewor are not true representations of the cultural values of African women today. They have held prominent positions of power, and have performed creditably well in such positions. For example, the like of the matriarch of Oyeronke Olademo was the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, between 2017 and 2019. This view was emphasized in the following words of Akande that:

In the fields of education, social economic, career, and other aspects of Nigerian life, mentions can be made of prominent women who have contributed meaningfully to national life. Among them to mention but few are; the late Prof. Dora Akunyili, one-time Director of NAFDAC, and the founder of Rebranding Nigeria Campaign, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, a former honorable Minister of Finance, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, a former Presidential Candidate of Action Congress Party and a one-time Honorable Minister of Education, Prof Ijaya, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Ilorin, Prof Oyeronke Olademo, a former and first female Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Prof. Grace Alele Williams, a one-time Vice Chancellor, University of Benin. It was specifically stated of Alele-Williams, a “Mathematician,” that, “she made valuable impacts with combination of courage, ingenuity and strategy that the growing tide of cultism was stemmed in the university. A task which many men had failed, she was able to make notable contributions” (Akande, 2004).

Also, supporting the above view, Ibim, stressed that; “Women surely deserve more. All over the world, they have had to fight to be relevant in every area of human endeavour based on the premise that most of the professions and positions of authority have to do more with talent and intellect than with any special physical attributes” (Ibim, 1999).

In the political and economic settings, the extent of the participation and involvement of women in the political and economic developments

of their environment as portrayed by Oyeronke Olademo in some of her works cannot be over-emphasized. Women in these fields of endeavours like others have proved to be genuine amazons. For instance, in the following works of the matriarch in this study, *Healing and Women Healers in Yoruba Religion and African Christianity*, published in 2012 in the *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, the economic values of women have been significantly stressed and brought to the limelight. They are referred to as healers, even with their male counterparts. They constitute a very important part of the patient's healing process in both Yoruba Religion and African Christianity.

In the words of Oyeronke Olademo; they are “specialists designated as healers/diviners/custodians of tradition in Yoruba religion. In African Christianity, they are known as prophetesses/prophets/deliverance ministers” (Olademo, 2012b). This in my view are means of promoting the economic values or livelihood of their immediate family and the society at large. This is equally in tandem with the opinion of The UN Women's Watch organization which asserts that “rural women play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food and nutritional security, generating income, and improving rural livelihoods and overall wellbeing” (UNWomen.org, 2013).

## **Oral Literatures and Texts as Sources of Oyeronke Olademo Theology**

Oyeronke Olademo is one of the foremost comparative religious scholars in Nigeria. Her most noted contribution is in the area of Yoruba religion and Christianity. In some of her works on Yoruba religion and Christianity, she makes use of oral literatures, orature, or folk literature (Olademo, 2009). This makes her research contribute significantly to the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm (Olademo, 2013). Oyeronke Olademo in her Inaugural Lecture observes that:

Yoruba religion is a living and world religion with adherents and influences all over the world. The religion is based on oral tradition, though some significant documentation has occurred in recent times. Ifa corpus constitutes the major source of instruction and guidance for the religion (Olademo, 2013:8).

One may begin to understand Olademo's attempt to enlighten the people on *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions* from the quote above. Oyeronke Olademo in her pursuit of how Yoruba women have negotiated their place and duties in Christianity using their cultural tradition of gender equality notes the inventiveness of Yoruba women, who have produced alternate power sources. She further observes that practically speaking, women still look for ways to confirm their identities despite the Christian tradition's limitations. This primarily takes place in ceremonial settings when women participate in women's groups and lead prayers, write songs, perform gospel music, hold chieftaincy titles, etc (Olademo, 2009).

According to Olademo, women maintain religions because they are the guardians of numerous oral genres and the archivists of tradition and custom, where ritual instructions are kept. Through songs, dances, recitations, and other performances, women ensure that faiths' daily activities continue (Olajubu, 2004b). However, religion is especially hurtful to women because, as is obvious, they often have dual roles: insiders because they are essential to maintaining the status quo and outsiders. After all, they have little influence on it. Moreover, the Yoruba proverb that goes like this can be used, to sum up, how women and religion interact *omó só sí ní l'enu, ò tún bu iyó sí, isó ò sé gbé mì béèni iyò kò se tu daànù* i.e. a child pollutes the air in your mouth but puts salt in the same mouth, it's a challenge to swallow the bad odour just as it's difficult to spit out the sweet salt (Olademo, 2013).

Furthermore, Olademo notes that although additional oral genres may be mentioned, the Ifa oracular corpus serves as the Yoruba religion's collection of scriptures (Olademo, 2013). She acknowledges that Ifa verse interpretation is a science that is available to people of both sexes, and the verses themselves are products of certain social contexts. The female Ifa priest is referred to as the *Iyanifa*, while the male priest is called *Babalawo*. Looking at Christianity up until recently, only men's and men's perspectives were used to interpret the texts. Over the years, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the serious consequences of Christianity's patriarchal teachings, with the general recommendation being a pursuit of equality between the sexes in positions of leadership. (Olademo, 2013).

## Oyeronke Olademo's Perspectives on Religion and Feminism

Oyeronke Olademo is of the view that women's studies and feminism in the social sciences led to the development of the study of women in religion. She said feminism as a notion developed as a result of women's opposition to how their communities treat them. Yet it's crucial to keep in mind that feminism can mean many things to various people and in various contexts. Feminist Christian theology in Africa is a reality in theory and practice, but it is not without difficulties. African women have a long history of female empowerment in traditional faiths, which could be used as a springboard for feminist exploration of the gospel. The group motive, which women successfully used to assert their power in the church, was one cultural impact in this direction (Olademo, 2012a).

Olademo's starting point was the attempt to show that the relationship between women and religions in Africa is a paradoxical bitter-sweet relationship. This is because "Religion more than any other phenomenon perpetuates the feminine mystique" (Olademo, 2013:7). She strongly believes that feminism has a clear mission and a reliable process. It aims to challenge gender roles and risk new interpretations of what constitutes appropriate roles and life experiences for women, as well as to take deliberate actions to educate women about the dangers of the feminine mystique, which encourages women to be passive. It also seeks to expose male privilege, which has been taken as normative and universal (Olajubu, 2004b, 2004a).

Oyeronke Olademo's approach is to emphasise the crucial negotiating position played by African culture in favor of women's empowerment. She notes that although the process of engaging the gospel from a feminist viewpoint in Africa is ongoing, its influences can be seen in certain practices of the churches. In addition, she observes that interpretations of the Bible are essential for problems with power and gender in religion. In her Inaugural lecture, for instance, she states that over the years, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the serious consequences of Christianity's patriarchal teachings, with the general recommendation being a pursuit of equality between the sexes in positions of leadership. In other



words, the Bible in particular is the primary source utilized to explain how women should interact with authority in religion (Olademo, 2013).

According to Oyeronke Olademo, in terms of Yoruba religion, women's leadership was given in precolonial periods and does not produce conflict, as is clear from a review of the religion's scriptures. The Yoruba cultural gender paradigm strongly affects how women see their position and roles across all religions. Due to this impact, Yoruba women have negotiated their place and duties in Christianity using their cultural tradition of gender equality (Olajubu, 2003; Olademo, 2009). In addition, Olademo opines that similar to how white missionaries were troubled by the forceful personalities and leadership positions of women in society, Yoruba women found the roles that were given to them in Christianity to be extremely unusual. That is why she states thus "the engagement of the gospel from the feminist perspectives in Africa is a process that requires the tenacious commitment of Christians, male, and female, to achieve a community of faith marked by mutual love and respect" (Olademo, 2012:41). This is the basis of her position on religion and feminism.

## **Thematic Appraisal**

This is a woman whose academic career has lasted over 32 years. She has been interested in religion since she was in primary school. It has always been amazing how the religious phenomenon can be used to efficiently communicate with the invisible. She has had the luxury of conducting religious research for more than thirty (30) years, with a focus on Christianity and Yoruba religion, among other areas of interest, particularly women, religion, culture, and society. To comprehend gender inequality, the feminist theory focuses on gender politics, power dynamics, and sexuality. It is within this context that the entire vision of Oyeronke Olademo for examining the reasons why women have not been given leadership positions in some religious organizations can be situated.

Indeed, one of the foremost comparative religious scholars in Nigeria, Oyeronke Olademo stands tall among the feminist circle due to her pioneering effort in the field of comparative religious studies, with a focus on women in religion in particular. Oyeronke Olademo's specific talents

enabled her to identify the link in the dynamic nature of women's standing in both Christianity and Yoruba religion, which she summarized as follows: "I have been interested in exploring why women have been excluded from leadership roles in some religious institutions and my findings show that this is primarily due to patriarchy, which was imposed on African societies through Western culture" (Olademo, 2013: 12). The effort to understand the issues led her to establish how the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm strongly affects how women perceive their status and roles in all religions (Olajubu, 2002a, 2002b, 2004b, 2008; Olademo, 2012b).

Of her most notable contributions the following can be distinguished: first and foremost, her criticism of the distinctive influence of cultural paradigms on the dynamic nature of women's status in Nigerian Christianity and Yoruba religion. Against this background, she proposed Christian and Yoruba religious leaders should promote gender equality to help women reach their full potential in both religions' leadership ranks. To achieve this, Olademo opines that to bring women's issues from the margins to the center of discourse in the study of religions in Nigeria, female interpretations and knowledge of scriptures should be respected and appreciated.

This realization led her to establishment of the Women Counseling Initiative (WCI), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to developing and implementing solutions to the suffering and poverty of women in Nigeria. As an educationist, Oyeronke Olademo exerts herself to impart knowledge and mentoring to many young people in various professions who are currently active contributors in their fields.

It is also important to state here that more advocacy and increase social awareness, particularly in a nation like Nigeria where illiteracy and poverty are pervasive, is needed to show the predicament of women in society and how religion has consistently mistreated women in the name of God. This is why her research on women, culture, religion, and society can be said to combine formal and informal educational approaches.

## CONCLUSION

This study showed that Oyeronke Olademo has made efforts to improve the condition of women in Nigeria. The central theme that interested Olademo is analyzing the processes of women's leadership roles in religious institutions and how patriarchy and its attending social structures became normative. Her research studies on comparative religion focused primarily on women, religion, culture, and society. Olademo demonstrates the various experiences of women in faith as they are currently practiced. With her work, religion serves as a lens through which the lives of women from a variety of nations and cultural backgrounds throughout the social spectrum are examined. Women from various religious and spiritual backgrounds from all over the world, especially in Africa, are featured in her works. Her works set the scene historically and socially in investigating family and environment, social and spiritual empowerment, power and sexuality, and how these influence roles in religion and society.

Oyeronke Olademo's contributions to practices and leadership can be further seen in *Yoruba Religions and Women's gender relations*. Yoruba women get and exercise agency in the family and society through their economic and religious responsibilities. Yoruba people also maintain a system of gender equality that prevents one of the sexes from being absorbed into the other. Olademo demonstrates how religion is at the heart of Yoruba lived experiences and is inextricably linked to all facets of daily life in Yorubaland.

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## 17 | HÉLÈNE YINDA'S AFRICAN FEMINIST APPROACH TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY

*Helen Namondo Linonge-Fontebo  
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### Abstract

Hélène Yinda, a matriarch from French speaking Cameroon, advocates for the liberation of African women with succinct evidence why they deserve a Nobel peace prize as opposed to other continents. She argues that sexual difference promotes women's human rights and liberates their creative energy in the context of hegemonic masculinity. According to Yinda, before the spread of the gospel in Africa, Africa had their own indigenous cultures, lifestyle and hospitality. Although the Christian gospel is perceived to have originated from the West, it was not an ideology to be imposed on Africans. The use of the African feminist theoretical framework of inclusiveness, collaboration and negotiation will be used to explain her quest for an ecumenical movement to transform the world. As such, Christians should be united to accept difference. The concept of difference and ecumenism educates people to be creative, thoughtful, reflective and imagine initiatives to liberate themselves from crisis - achievable only through a grand world movement willing to help local institutions. The bottom line is that this new gospel or ecumenism must not lose sight of Africa's contribution. Furthermore, Hélène Yinda advocates for the eradication of gender inequalities, such as gender-based violence, injustices, stereotypes, prejudices against African women and traditions, which degrades and enslaves women due to ignorance and fear. This research is historical, descriptive and qualitative and will answer the following questions: How has Hélène Yinda's research changed African theology, address feminism and improve on the rights of African women? What are the cultural and religious context that motivates her works? What are the sources of her findings, which led to her quest for ecumenism and gender equality? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of the French Speaking Matriarch- Hélène Yinda.

**Keywords:** Hélène Yinda, Feminist approach, Liberation theology, African feminism, Matriarch, Cameroon

## Introduction

Dr. Héléne Yinda is a powerful and assertive figure in Francophone Africa, reflected in the leadership disintegration in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) after the 2007 Pan-African meeting that took place in Cameroon. According to Helen Labeodan (2016), it was at the Cameroon meeting, that most French-speaking members left the Circle and probably some of the sponsors as well. The Cameroonian experience highlights the personality of Matriarch Helene Yinda, who would have risen to the rank of general coordinator if given a chance as an active Francophone. Her popularity amongst French-speaking Cameroonians shows that she has the capacity of bringing back the fallen members and sponsors if the Circle gives her a chance. Researching on Yinda is of essence because Maponda (2016:1) had – projected this in his book when he emphasized the need for great personalities of the Circle from English and French zone with revolutionary ideologies to be highlighted if Africa must be transformed. Héléne Yinda, demystifies the scientific approach of the Holy scriptures because all those approaches hide the fact that the Word of God is first of all a word of Life, a shared word, a word for an existential conversion with values of love, mercy, generosity and sharing. Without contesting the importance of solid theological training, in order to avoid the rise of dictatorial ignorance and the male exigence to maintain women in low educational levels, attitudes that Héléne Yinda strongly denounces (Yinda and Mana, 2005:41).

## Biography of Héléne Yinda

Mbenda Ngo Héléne Yinda is a preacher, an African theologian and an orphan, born in Cameroon from the Bassa ethnic group. She did her primary and secondary education in Cameroon, between 1991 and 1995. She obtained her first degree and a Master's degree in Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Yaounde with an option in African religion. She is an advocate for the liberation of African women through the action of the Afrique et Moyen Orient de l'Alliance Mondiale des Unions Chrétiennes Feminines translated 'World Alliance of Women's Christian Unions' (YWCA – Geneva), and the Director of the Department of Africa and the Middle East. She was the coordinator of the French – speaking

wing of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She was previously the head of the Women's Department of the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church and a member of the General Committee of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). She also obtained her doctorate in Feminist Theology from Theological Seminary in San Francisco in California, USA in 2014.

In the area of Theology, she is engaged in the construction of an African feminist theology through colloquiums, workshops, and seminars. Some examples are Addis Ababa 2002, Poto Novo in Benin 2003. She is an advocate on women and development, the church and the society, a militant on liberation theology, liberation of women from inhuman traditional practices, and interpretation of Biblical text. Yinda also advocates for the liberation of women from oppression, servitude, male domination and patriarchy so that men and women can give birth to a new humanity – revolutionary theology.

She has written a number of books alone and in collaboration with other authors. For example, she wrote a number of books with Ka Mana such as: "for the New Theology of African Women", *Rethinking Sexual Difference, Promoting Women's rights and freeing their creative energies* (Editions CLE – CIPCRE 2001). Mana and Yinda discuss the destiny, hope, experiences of African women and all the struggles they are engaged with for the recognition of their rights, liberty, and their dignity for being Africans today (CIPCRE 2001). Yinda also wrote the preface of a book written by three authors Ka Mana, Marcellin Setondji Doussou and Jean-Blaise Kenmogne entitled the message of HIV/ AIDS in Africa which highlights her interest in women's sexuality. Yinda is astute, assiduous and possess the leadership skills of a general coordinator of the Circle as per the French-speaking members who wanted to do justice with multilingualism in the Circle. Given that, when the circle was created, Musimbi Kanyaro was the first English-speaking general coordinator from Kenya and in 2002, Isabel Phiri from Malawi became the second general coordinator still from an English-speaking nation.

It was therefore expected that in the Cameroonian meeting the next general coordinator should be French-speaking which never materialized, instead Falato Moyo was elected from an English-speaking country



and institution like her predecessor despite the fact that the circle is multilingual. Hence it is expected that other linguistic groups should be given a chance at being the general coordinator. Hence at the Cameroon meeting the French-speaking members were unhappy with the re-election of another English-speaking coordinator. Most Circle sisters thought Hélène Yinda, the Francophone coordinator, should have been given a chance at this meeting. She has been faithful and committed to the issues of the Circle, given that she was doing all the French translation of the Circle with the help of able assistants (Labeodan, 2016:5).

## **Methodology**

This research is historical, descriptive and qualitative in nature. It was principally a desktop review with secondary data from books, articles and reviews with other authors.

## **Culture, Religion and Liberation Theology**

Modern evangelization must be rooted in ecumenism, in the church and if possible, in a small community as cardinal Malula wanted. In communion with all the Christian churches, hence the importance of the ecumenical movements to transform the world. To Yinda, when Christians are divided it is a scandal. Christians should come together by accepting differences (see religious pluralism). The author nevertheless criticizes the “spiritual” communities where one is content to pray while asking for miracles and the coming of the Spirit. Instead, the people should be taught to create, to think, to reflect and to imagine initiatives for ways out of the crisis – the vision of ecumenism. To Yinda, ecumenism is premised on the achievement of a great global construction movement set up to help in building local forces. In the course of this new evangelization, African values and contributions must be interwoven to Christianity. Sharing in a community spirit (Yinda, 2007).

Culture is both oppressive and liberating (Kanyoro in Labeodan, 2016:6). Yinda and Mana condemn sexual harassment in the workplace especially about what happens amongst secretaries and the army. These authors decry the fact that there is extreme sexual violence against

women despite the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. There is also violence propagated by women themselves – widowhood. The authors further decry levirate marriage, a practice which had a good justification in the pre-colonial era because families did not want to leave the woman of the deceased in absolute distress. Someone was therefore chosen from the family to take charge of the widowhood. However, this is not the case today where there is male domination on women in Africa (Yinda and Mana, 2001).

The above authors also decry other sexuality issues in Africa like Female circumcision/ Female Genital Mutilation and polygamy which subordinate women and argued that polygamy has lost its significance in Africa. The authors narrated what polygamy used to be from the perspective of their grandfather who practiced it with wisdom and in an organized system and not the “bureaugamie” that exist today. Polygamy is now associated to a man with several offices. It has become a system of pleasure and that is what the authors are questioning. A society where husbands and wives give no attention to their relationship. Giving the fact that African women constitute a great social force for transformation today, be it the church, civil society, politics, associations, they have the potential to bring change in Africa and that is all there is for Africa’s future. The challenge is that African women should have it in mind that they are at the center of the revolution to reconstruct Africa.

All of the above has a spiritual dimension. It is in looking at the gospel that we see the liberation practice of Jesus. The Bible is a revolutionary book. The first thing the Bible illuminates is that man is given free choice. Eve ate this mysterious fruit so that man becomes free and take responsibility and to leave Paradise that God ordained for man. Secondly, is when God sent a savior to humanity. It is important that God passed through woman to bring the spirit Savior. The choice of a woman is not invisible in God’s vision and for women today. Thirdly, it was women who first testified about the resurrection of Jesus that has transformed the destiny of humanity. It shows that women played a dynamic revolutionary role in God’s vision (Mana & Yinda, 2001).

Women theologians make theology through their social experiences, cultures and religions, depending on whether they are Christian, Muslim, Jew or animist. Bernadette Mbuyi-Beya in her co-authored work with

Yinda, argues that women theologians believe in a particular God's word for women and they stand by it to proclaim freedom and renew their experience with God, but not a way to reject classical theology. They talk of contextual theology which is also the argument of African feminist (see the section of African feminist theoretical framework below) (Yinda and Mbuyi-Beya, 2007:163-164). In my opinion, there can never be a homogeneous/universal voice but multiple voices based on their daily experience in Africa and with God.

Maponda (2016:2) reports that at the heart of the Circle of Concerned Women theologians, Helene Yinda made preaching and biblical studies an opportunity to talk about existential problems, with new instruments of popular reading different from scientific reading. In her book, *Women in Africa*, Yinda fosters her liberation theology to bring the gospel as a new speech to men and women in churches. She opened a school for women in Yaounde, Cameroon, the school specifically links theology and life, biblical reading and concrete problems. The objective is to find in the Word of God the base of relief and the power to face difficult situations of life.

The opening of this school erases the notion that theology can only be done inside classical higher institutions with university criteria. Yinda also reports the analogy of Togolese theologian Kasa Dovi, who postulates women's main fight based on the review of Paul's letters related to women's situation, while the Cameroonian theologian Louise Tappa denounces the lies about a patriarchal reading of the bible from Adam, the man from whom women's inferiority is sacralised because she introduced the sin into the world (Yinda, 2002:54). Her liberation theology goes beyond academia and embraces the demystification of scientific theology and engenders a real popular and lively theology – an important impact of the Circle in the French-speaking zone.

Yinda & Mana (2005:41), question the life of African women before and after Christianity in their book "for the new theology of African women". In this book, there was gender division of labour where men and women had their own roles to play. As such, Coquery-Vidrovitch in (Yinda & Mana, 2005) admitted that there was almost nothing about the precolonial feminine universe which emerged with colonialism. It became doubtful whether the arrival of the missionaries change the lives of

women for the better or for the worse. There was a conception of female dependence as strong in Africa as there was in Europe a certain Christian legal vision of male domination. It is clear that in Africa, the problems for women are expected to free themselves from all the cultural atavisms which are responsible for the customs still lived today. The catalogue of such customs which range from widowhood rites to inheritance systems, from female circumcision to early marriage would take a long time to do.

From the moment when Christ is announced as the way of the human being and the measure of all things, neither the ancestral traditions of Africa nor the culture of the missionaries can any longer be lived as before. A new destiny begins...; with Christ nothing would be as before. The woman burst onto the religious scene (Yinda & Mana, 2005:54-55). Yinda's research has also influenced feminism and improved on the rights of African women in several ways. For instance, in her book "the Theology of creative femininity" she analyses five principles for a theology of creative femininity in Africa as follows:

1. When the spirit of God fertilizes a woman, the destiny of the world changes from top to bottom. The author gives an example of Kimpa Vita also known by her Portuguese name Dona Beatriz who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1684-1706) in the Kingdom of Congo (Northern Angola). Kimpa Vita was a Congo prophetess, founder and leader of the Antonialist movement, a form of syncretism between Catholicism and traditional religions of Congo. She fought for reunification of the Kongo kingdom plagued by Portuguese anarchy. She was caught by the Capuchins, condemned to the Stake and died, burned alive by the order of King Dom Pedro IV on July 2, 1706. From her youth, Kimpa Vita was recognized as "nyanga marinda", an intermediary between men and the world of the spirits (Yinda in Ngongo, 2015:46) She was initiated into the secret society known as "Kimpasi". The Kimpasi society had a mission to deliver people from evil forces through exorcism ceremonies called "mbumba kindonga". Vita was influenced by the prophecies of Appotonia Mafuta "Fumaria", who announces a divine punishment and walks with a stone which she presents as the head of Christ deformed by the wickedness of men (Kabwita, 2004 in Yinda & Mana, 2016). From 1703 – 1704, Kimpa Vita claimed to have

received revelations and announced that God will punish the inhabitants of the kingdom if the latter is not reunited, with Sao Salvador as its capital. It also teaches that the white missionaries distorted the divine message to deceive the black population (Yinda & Mana, 2016).

In an attempt to contextualize Jesus in Africa, Kimpa Vita taught that Jesus, his apostles and many biblical characters are black and are mostly Bisi Kongo (the true chosen people). That the real Holy Land is the Kongo and at the same time identifies Sao Salvador as the heavenly Jerusalem and announces that King Antoine (Nkanga in Kikongo) must be considered a messiah (Yinda in Ngongo, 2015). It is also claimed that Kimpa died every Friday and resurrected every Sunday, after spending two days conversing with God. Her movement is called Antonian or Antonianist. She recognized the authority of the pope but hostile to European missionaries, mainly active on the atlantics coast. Peter IV warned against the success of Antonianist movement, ended up having her arrested and condemned to the stake with her child, after a heresy trial before the civil court advised by the capuchin missionaries Bernardo da Gallo and Lorenzo da Lucca (JeuneAfrique.com 2018).

Kimpa Vita fought for the unity and reunification of Kongo dia Ntolila which was ravaged by a war that lasted 40 years and she also campaigned against Portuguese colonization and also the slave trade. Yinda like Vita is a figure of nationalism and anti-colonialism. Her action benefited Mvemba Aqua Rosasa king of Kongo who will be at the origin of the reunification of the kingdom. Hélène Yinda's illustration above demonstrates her liberation theology and African feminist thinking in Kumpa Vita who defied imperialism and believed in herself and the African god. In her case, the politics of naming invented by African feminist to shy away from the terminology feminism was not necessary. What is at stake is the issue of agency, subjectivity and power – the power to name oneself, one's location and one's struggle is key carefully adopted by Vita who renamed her own god. Writing about Kumpa Vita indicates Yinda's agreement with Nnaemeka (2001) assertion that there is and must be a diversity of feminisms (theology), responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women (men), and defined by them for themselves [not a universality of one God].

2. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, she gives birth to the son of God. It was Mary of Nazareth obviously but also Marie Mvila wife of the prophet Simon Kimbangu.
3. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, it is for the birth of a united world...a world of love, this “essential of the essential” by which Christ defined the first and greatest commandments.
4. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, the resurrection of society is a stake ...it is through women that the disciples understand that Christ is risen.

They are African women who founded ‘the Circle of African theologians’ and who wrote the book “the will to arise” “The will to stand up”. The will to arise: women, tradition and the church in Africa by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (editor) and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro. What is the reality of being African woman and Christian? In this collection of original essays, African women theologians write about the life and dreams, the sorrows and joys of African women in a continent where religion shapes the whole of life. The first and second part of the book describes the role of women in terms of culture, rites of passage and daily life. Attitudes towards birthing and naming, marriage and widowhood, polygamy and prostitution and death are all explored. The third part focuses on the church, reviewing biblical attitudes toward women, and showing how African women can and should contribute to the life of the Christian church.

5. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, the mission of the woman becomes a fight for freedom. So be they!

In the book meeting between two cultures that have become pagan by Cheza and Guanst, Helene Yinda writes that with the arrival of the gospel in Africa, these are two paganized cultures that clashed. To Yinda, Africans exalt life, the joy of living, hospitality but the fear of invisible spirits have blurred this culture of life and paganized it. In Africa the values of life so much vaunted by the thinkers of Africa were weighed down by enormous powers of the invisible (Cheza and Guanst, n.d:126). Westerners preached the gospel but they forgot that this gospel was “good news” and not an ideology to be imposed by force.

In the theology of creative femininity with Ka Mana, Yinda observes the deep Neopaganism of contemporary civilization. It is therefore Christians who have become pagans, individualists, selfish, dominators who arrive in Africa. Moreover, by insisting on the individualist principles of personal conversion and personal salvation, he broke the community authority of the African spirit and finally all cultures come together and become pagan. The world culture today is structured outside the gospel and it is imperative to evangelize this culture. In this new culture, money has taken the place of the father, individualism has taken the place of the son and obsession with power has taken the place of the Holy Ghost.

### **African feminist perspective/ theoretical framework**

African feminist Charter define their work as investing individual and institutional energies in the struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation. Not different from bell Hooks definition as a movement to end all forms of sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. African feminisms, in their definitive plurality offer to speak of feminism from an African cultural perspective, an African geo-political location, and an African ideological viewpoint (Nkealah, 2016:62). When African feminist name themselves as feminists, they politicize the struggle for women's rights and question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multitude and varied identities as African feminists. The focus is on the lives of African women on the continent/environment.

Our feminism must share with the global feminist movement, the commitment to dismantle patriarchy in all its manifestations particularly on the African continent – the mindset of H el ene Yinda. African feminism is not confrontational, rather it is a feminism of cooperation/negotiation, compromise, accommodation which does not exclude men, a feminism of no egos – “nego-feminism” (Nnaemeka, 2001:319). This stance challenges men “to be aware of certain aspects of women’s subjugation because African women and men are united in a common struggle against their dehumanization through colonialism, western hegemony and racism. As such African women are doubly oppressed, hence African feminists are committed to two struggles: the struggle for empowerment

of African women and the fight for the decolonizing of African societies, and overshadowing of African knowledge and narratives (Nnaemeka in Dosekun, 2021:54).

African feminism demands the interrogation of cultural assumptions (decoloniality), recognizing that historical and socio-political events which contributed to and continue to compound the perception of African womanhood and gender inequalities on the continent. They reject western conceptualizations of what African womanhood/gender constructs entail, as well as western/colonial methods to perceiving, interrogating and countering gender inequalities on the continent, asserting the inadequacy of western feminism to address the unique problems of African women. Demand for African-centered analysis of African societies and issues which respects African culture enough to retain what is of value/non-harmful to African women yet reject those aspects that work to their detriment.

This theory clearly fits Yinda's liberation theology, given that, Amina Mama differentiates feminism from what she calls "femocracy" referring to the popular struggle for African women for their liberation from the various forms of oppression they endure (Dosekun, 2021:54). Yinda's quest for a liberation theology and gender equality also evokes transnational feminism which is inspired by a feminist tradition of collaboration that is defining characteristics of black women's public and private lives throughout the world and brings women together as builders of communities and as creators of knowledge. Collaborative and communal work in the name of freedom, creative expression, and justice is a core theme in histories of women in Africa and the African diaspora (Rodriguez, Tsikata & Ampofo, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The writings of Hélène Yinda qualify and depict her as a matriarch, an African feminist and a theological and liberation theologian in her quest for gender equality and evangelical/ religious contextualization if Africa must be transformed. According to this author, ecumenism, collaboration, solidarity and negotiation propels true gospel for transformation that the world needs and not individualism which is far from the original



conceptualization of the gospel. To achieve the latter, imperialism/colonialism must be eradicated and Africa's contribution taken into account as well as women's perspective.

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## 18 | CHARTING ON AFRICAN FEMINIST PASTORAL BEARINGS OF ESTHER ACOLATSE

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### **Abstract**

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (Circle) Sankofa 2024 celebration warrants the highlight of the theological contribution of Circle matriarchs. In her several publications, Esther Acolatse's discusses her view of African pastors' style of pastoral counselling in Africa, especially in Ghana, thus making a tacit contribution to African Women Liberation theology. Pastoral care-giving is central in Acolatse's discussions as seen in most publications. Using several theories and scholars, she argues that in order to meet the needs of the counselee maximally, the counsellor needs to face the person holistically, rather than treat only the spiritual aspect of the individual. Acolatse's works opens up a whole lot of possibilities for future challenge and discoveries in Africa in the area of pastoral counselling and care-giving. This paper sets out to unveil some of the issues by answering these research questions: What informs Acolatse's work? What are its theological sources and contexts? What does her theology seek to achieve? What is the main strength and contribution of Acolatse's work to the world of knowledge?

**Keywords:** Pastor, pastoral, psychology, counselling

### **Introduction**

Prof Esther Acolatse was among the sixty-nine women who gathered in Legon, Ghana in 1989 and launched the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle). Acolatse is therefore a founding member of the Circle, a graduate of the University of Ghana (BA Hons); Harvard Divinity School (MTS) and Princeton Theology Seminary (PhD). Before, she taught Pastoral Theology and World Christianity at Duke Divinity School at Durham, North Carolina. She is also a preacher, public speaker, retreat leader, educator. In 2017 she joined Knox College (Toronto School

of Theology) as Associate Professor and on 19th May 2021 she was promoted to the rank of full professor (<https://knox.utoronto.ca>). Acolatse is currently a Professor of Pastoral Theology and Intercultural Studies at the Knox College. Esther Acolatse is an African Christian who uses her gifts and experiences in pastoral theology to give care to care seekers and to instruct promising care givers. In her study, research and practice Acolatse applies her own Ghanaian culture as a stepping stone to open to the worldview of the African in different aspects of life. Her contribution to Liberation theology is worth celebrating, and this paper seeks to do this using the following outline: Awards and Academic Achievements; Academic Contribution; Views on African Christian and Pastoral Counseling; Main Theological Contribution; And Conclusion.

## Awards and Academic Achievements

Esther Acolatse is an accomplished writer who has won several awards: the Carnegie Africa Diaspora Fellowship, Duke University's Julian Abele Mentor of the Year-First Runner-up, a Duke Global Health Initiative Grant, American Association of University Women-International Fellow Award, and the World Council of Churches-theological Education Scholarship. Her scholarship that earned these awards includes several books and articles. Some of her publications include: Acolatse EEE (2011) Christian Divorce Counselling in West Africa: Seeking Wholeness through Reformed Theology and Jungian Dreamwork. In *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 21(1), 2-18; Acolatse EEE (2011) All in the Family: Recasting Religious Pluralism Through African Contextuality. *Religious Diversity and Conflict* (15), 261-271; Acolatse EEE (2013) Hope and God as Good-Enough Mother: The Development of Hope in Job. *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 23(2) 1-22; Acolatse EEE (2014a) *For Freedom or Bondage? A Critique of African Pastoral Practices*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans; Acolatse EEE (2014b) What is Theological About Practical Theology? Towards a Pastoral Hermeneutic of Primal Speech. *Practical Theology* 7(3), 205-220; Acolatse EEE (2014) Culture of War, Violence, and Sexual Assault in the Military: An Ethic of Compromise? *Journal of Pastoral Theology*. Taylor and Francis, 24(1), 4-29, (<http://doi.org/10.1179/jpt.2014.24/1.004>); Acolatse EEE (2018) *Powers, Principalities and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa*

*and the West*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans; Acolatse EEE (2020) Interview of Dr Emmanuel Evans-Anfom. *Journal of African Christian Biography* 5(3), 39-45. The list is not exhaustive however, her passion for soul-care runs through all her writings, and other themes with which she is concerned are examined in the next section. Acolatse also serves in numerous academic guilds, publications and organizations including: the council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa College of Mentors and the Association of Theological Schools Board of Commissioners; Advisory council for the Journal and Dictionary of African Christian Biography; International Academy of Practical theology; American Academy of Religion, Society for Pastoral Theology; Yale -Edinburgh Group for the Study of Christianity in a Non-Western World, Associate Fellow at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University.

### **Esther Acolatse's Academic Contributions**

This work seeks to give a brief chart on the African feminist pastoral bearings of Esther Acolatse. All scripture references used are from the New Revised Standard Version. Among the books Acolatse has written and published the theme of pastoral care and counselling dominates. This is seen in the application of her methods in all writings including articles and books some of which are discussed below.

#### ***Dynamic Exclusivism as the Basis for Soul-Care***

In an essay titled, "All in the Family: Recasting Religious Pluralism Through African Contextuality," Acolatse seeks to address the issue of continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and other forms of religion. Using John Hick and Karl Barth as Christian scholars standing on the opposite side of the debate she argues from the point of pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism. According to Acolatse, pluralists like John Hick propose a 're-evaluation of the main tenets of Christian beliefs' that serve as blockages to inter-religious dialogue. On the other hand, Barth representing orthodox theologians advocate for discontinuity between Christianity and other forms of religion. Acolatse seeks to solve this dichotomy, by offering a 'means of healing the bifurcation between Christian exclusivism and pluralism by a dynamic exclusivism that seeks to

overcome both the triumphalism of current exclusivism and the extreme universalism' that attends Christian pluralism (Acolatse, 2011:261).

Acolatse (2011:262-263) divides her paper into five parts, first she offers a description of the African (particularly West African) context highlighting examples of its multi-religious existence; second, she assesses the proposed solutions for accommodating religious plurality (framed primarily within Western culture), especially John Hick's call to pluralism; third she critiques the Hickian position showing the inadequacies in addressing the practical issues of religious believers (especially in West Africa); in the fourth part Acolatse proposes both a re-evaluation of religious dialogue and the adoption of the Barthian exclusivist view as a more viable avenue not only for inter-and intra-religious dialogue, but also for a soul-care, and lastly, she examines from a Christian perspective examples of how this soul-care works within and across religious traditions.

Acolatse (2011:262) submits that pluralism is a reality of African lives, thus a need for religious co-existence. Using Ghana and Nigeria as examples, she cites those conflicts arise when one religion tradition, (Christianity, Islam, or Indigenous) is privileged over others (Acolatse, 2011:263). She argues that Christian exclusivism is a mutually inclusive means of respecting other religious traditions and embracing one's own. In this light, various traditions should be conflated and each invited to the larger anthropological question which leads everyone to creation which marks the beginning of "our common humanity, rather than salvation (the end). She underscores that the African context is particularly inviting of analysis for two reasons; first, it approaches the pluralism question as one of soteriology, a matter of ends, and thus of means, and second, it approaches the issue from an anthropological perspective, seeking to understand what it means to be human.

Acolatse does not just seek to show the conflict between pluralistic and exclusivist theologians, she critiques Hick's Knitter's and Smith's proposed solutions for accommodating religious plurality. She notes that these theologians challenge Christianity to "desist from claiming that Christ is the definitive and normative revelation in whom all truth and ultimate salvation resides, and to shift from a Christocentric to a theocentric mode which allows all religions to be equidistant to God.". (Acolatse, 2011:266). Acolatse critiques this position arguing that Hick and Knitter's

(1987: vii-xii) position has serious implications for pastoral theology of ministry. Showing through her experience she demonstrates that inter-religious encounter, uncertainty about what one believes provide more opportunities for inter-religious conflict than an “unshakeable knowledge tinged with personal and communal experience of the *Real*” (Acolatse, 2011:266).

Acolatse draws on Barthian perspective of pluralism (Barth 1975, 1/11:326) and proposes the concept of dynamic exclusivism to advocate for an appropriate stance towards other religions and acts in a pastorally responsible way across denominational and religious backgrounds (Acolatse, 2011:267). Acolatse (2011:269) argues further dynamic exclusivism is the basis for soul-care in a multi and iner-religious situation. She expounds thus:

Dynamic exclusivism allows each religious tradition to maintain its truth claim. What transpires, if the Christian claim is true, is that the epistemological pitting of truth against truth is undercut by the encounter with truth as a person, who is then invited into the space of our common need and embraces us. If the scriptural attestation is true, and Bath’s explication is on target- which I believe to be the case-the pastors in the scenarios do not need to require the care-seekers to exit their religious beliefscapes to be encountered by the Truth.

Acolatse’s soul-care therapy suggests that care-givers must understand the religious context of the care seeker and in care-giving, they do not need to alienate the care-seeker from this background. She thus suggests an appropriate pastoral formation in divinity and Seminaries as crucial to disciple Christians for witness and life in a pluralistic world. She notes that “dynamic exclusivism allows one to hold the truth of the ultimate revelation of God in Christ via the church or Christianity, as explained in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* (17, 18 & 69) which demonstrates the importance of the “neighbor” as our priority to the real “neighbor” who is Jesus in whom God and people become eternal “neighbors” (Acolatse, 2011:268). In this light care-givers can administer soul-care without any religious bias, and soul-care seekers can approach givers with no fear. This is tenable so that people from all religious background can receive soul-care when soul-care



givers transcend their various religious tenets in the face of the claim of God made through the neighbor, the God-man on their lives.

### ***Counselling in Marital Conflicts and its Effects on Men and Women***

In her publication titled “Christian Divorce Counselling in West Africa: Seeking Wholeness through Reformed Theology and Jungian Dreamwork in the *Journal of Pastoral Theology*,

Acolatse is concerned with pastoral counselling in marital conflicts and its effects on men and women. She uses the stories of two West African women to interrogate the sociological background and current Christian theology used in marital counselling through a reformed lens, giving attention to Jungian psychology as it pertains to individual formation and empowerment (Acolatse, 2011:1). She divides her paper into three parts: part 1 deals with the sociocultural issues associated with marriage, family, and divorce in West Africa; Part 2 examines the theological dimension of marriage and divorce in Reformed Perspective; and the third part discusses psychodynamic issues related to ambivalence and disengagement from unhealthy relational commitments.

In the first part Acolatse opines that in Africa as opposed to the West, marital commitments and how they are perceived and lived out are constricted by cultural norms and expectations. The contractual value given to marriage is seen in the deep involvement of extended family in the marriage processes since marriage is not about two individuals joining together but extended families coming together (Acolatse, 2011:2). She notes that the rituals performed whether at the civil ceremonies, church blessing/wedding or traditional marriage ceremonies carry a psycho-spiritual binding commitment that transcends the two individuals extending to ancestors, the spiritual guardians of the families (Acolatse, 2011:3). Acolatse is acutely aware of the disadvantages women face in relation to men when the marriages are failing, and they are constraints to stay with negligent or even abusive partners. This is due to the gendered face of the sources, and assumed reasons for marital conflict (Acolatse, 2011:3). She laments that women in Ghana, Nigeria and Togo bear the covert expectation that wives are the custodians and sustainers of the relationship, and thus are often counselled to endure, live up to scriptural mandate claiming from a theological perspective that God will honour the

woman's unquestioned obedience and turn the marriage around. She concludes that no substantive spiritual growth has been derived from service and submission to a nonreciprocal relationship has been found to be theologically adequate and psychologically functional (Acolatse, 2011:3).

### ***Hope and its Implications for Pastoral Theology Care and Counselling***

In her article titled *Hope and God as Good-Enough Mother: The Development of Hope in Job*, Acolatse discusses the development of hope in Job (primordial human) through his trials as identified with the development strides of an infant who navigates the tensions of trust vs mistrust and finds hope rather than despair due to the environment creates by God as a "good-enough mother." She examines the dynamics at play in Job and God's relationship, and necessity of hope and suggests the implications for pastoral theology care and counselling (Acolatse, 2013:1). In the paper, Acolatse applies the Object Relations theory (ORT) in interpreting the book of Job with a view of exposing the psychological and theological issues raised in the book with regard to hope, and with the formation of the self in relation to the "primary other." Object Relation Theory is a useful psychological theory that allows for an exploration of parallels between Job's view of God and an infant's conception of mother or primary care giver. It sees the development of the self as occurring in three phases; the infant-mother/primary caregiver dyad/symbiosis; the second stage is the separation and individuation stage characterised by relative independence and the building up of hope (Acolatse, 2013:6-7). Acolatse notes that "in fact, the dynamics at play in the dyadic relationship between the infant and the good-enough mother is one that corresponds to Job's relationship with God. At the end of Job's story, we observe the epitome of hope, which is the litmus test, if you will of good-enough mothering. Applying this to pastoral care, Acolatse states that hope is central to the life and particularly the task of faithful Christian living and care-giving (Acolatse, 2013:10).

### ***Holistic Pastoral Counselling***

In her 2014 book, *For Freedom or Bondage? A Critique of African Pastoral Practices*, published by William B. Eerdmans in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Acolatse makes a critique of African pastoral practices. She argues that

Christian pastoral practices in many African churches include Western perspectives from Barth's theological anthropology and Jung's analytical psychology. She interrogates problematic cultural narratives and analyses how they play on both care seekers and care givers. She advises that in order to heal holistically the pastoral counsellor has to pay attention to all the components of the human person.

### ***Pastoral Diagnosis***

Acolatse's second major book is *Powers, Principalities and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West* also published by William B. Eerdmans, in 2018. It is a follow up on her book on *For Freedom or Bondage* (2014). Acolatse explores the West and African perspectives, using the case of Ghana. She analyses views on attitudes towards supernatural powers and principalities and the difference between the church of the West and the South. In this work, Acolatse tries to bridge the gap between hermeneutics between the West and its theological heritage. The book tries to construct a Christian therapeutic model which draws from the worldview and life experiences of the Africans and yet transcends its context.

Acolatse's understanding of pastoral diagnosis for care and counselling is situated withing the Independent Evangelical/ Charismatic Churches (IECC). She uses this as a base to study current pastoral practice in Ghana Independent Charismatic Churches. Acolatse posits that methods of healing are from African Traditional Religion (ATR) rather than from the Word of God. Using special theological intervention, pastors do everything with the influence of the spirit world. These overlooks hidden psychological issues and as such does not help the care seekers. It distracts people's psyche as they are dismissed as either do not have enough faith or God has failed them. In the work Acolatse examines Ghanaian pastoral counselling from a theological and pastoral perspective (and argues that) its basic assumptions about human beings and its methods are inadequate from a Christian perspective. She explores the ATR and its effects on African Christological Anthropology. African cosmology she says affects African theology a lot (Acolatse, 2014:20).

Acolatse (2014:3) uses the Church in Ghana as a window into contemporary African pastoral practice. She identifies three main church denominations in order of age: the oldest is historic/missionary churches

tied to colonisation, firstly, the Anglican, Basel mission, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and the Roman Catholic. They proclaimed a gospel in Western garb with a foreign worship experience to Africans. Emphasis was more cerebral and verbal rather than celebrative and symbolic. In times of crisis these Africans fall back on African Traditional Religions. Eventually groups formed and broke away to form African Independent Churches (AIC) in the 20th century. Secondly, this gradually produced syncretism of Christianity and African Traditional Religions. These Christians are baptised and confirmed in the church but daily are far from doctrine and sacred scriptures. Thirdly, the Independent Evangelical/Charismatic Churches (late 1960s). These were developed from house fellowships in order to study the scriptures more. They believe a lot in and love to practice speaking in tongues. Lamin Sanneh concurs with this sequence of the development of churches in Ghana (Sanneh, 1983:107). Acolatse (2014:20) focuses on them because first, they are growing more rapidly than the historic churches. Also, Pobee observed that the AIC represented an indigenizing moment in African Christianity (Pobee, 1991:10). Acolatse (2014:7-8) observes that the cosmology of African Traditional Religion influences these churches' practices more than the saving grace of Jesus Christ; they mistake youthful exuberance for the presence of the spirit-given that during prayer people jump, shout and fall. Second, the historic churches are losing members to them because it is believed that the African Independent Churches are the future of the country (and continent). Bediako affirms that they are in fact indicating the trend and direction of African Christianity (1995:113).

For methodology, Acolatse applied questionnaire to pastors and attended church services (participant observation) and had conversations with pastors. She noted who and how the pastor selected people for counselling and deliverance. Fifty pastors were interviewed: eight from historic churches; while thirty-eight from Evangelical Churches and four from parachurch organisations. In her findings, she discovered that "Christian anthropology is sufficient to accurately discern the complexity of needs that parishioner bring to their pastors" (Acolatse, 2014:20). In addition, these pastors need medical, psychological, spiritual training, for themselves and their assistants. During counselling sessions, counselees

are asked detailed questions which lay them almost nude before the pastor-counsellor. It then becomes very easy for anyone listening to the counselee to come to some assistance, let alone a pastor. She realised that all cases were considered spiritual. This gave the impression that spiritual forces exist outside the rule and there is power struggle between God and spiritual forces. These ideas are false, blasphemous and do not distinguish between God as Creator and spiritual powers as creatures. This gives the idea that Christianity in Ghana has yet to transcend its cultural moment. Acolatse applied Barthian theological anthropology. Using Barthian theology and Jungian psychology, Acolatse (2014:20) makes a distinction for theological issues to be treated theologically; while emotional issues should be handled psychologically. In addition, she tries to marry the two perspectives in addressing the complexity of spirituality.

One interesting finding is captured in Acolatse remarks that a lot of care seekers are women; why is it so? (Acolatse, 2014:21). Women are mostly observed to be the care seekers. In finding answers why. One need to realize that some African cultures and church traditions have placed more burdens on women that they are faced with so many challenges which include their physical and spiritual wellbeing. In this case the pastor or counsellor should connect both the theology and psychology in helping women who seek care. The Pastor should develop a Christianity that transcends cultural moments, especially for the Ghanaian community.

Acolatse seems to decolonize the Ghanaian community against Western traditional church. She acknowledges the African Independent churches which requires critical analysis to avoid syncretism. She upholds contextuality as a means to make meaning of the gospel. Whereas the Pastor should merge African cosmology and Christian theology to understand people's way of life. In this regard, I suggest Ghanaian Pastors and Theologians should find ways to understand the psychological and spiritual challenges of African women as related to African cosmology that seems to burden women and provide the necessary help they seek.

Pastors and counsellors should provide Christian theology that's against what the Western churches and African Traditional religion believes about God. What women require is a Christian theology that emphasizes relationship with the Trinitarian God and not just seeking God for healing, protection, provision, and so on. But the significance of the

power and message of the Cross should be brought to light and that the finished work of the crucified Christ covers all the help that African women seek.

Why are things explained spiritually, even clinical cases? This makes Acolatse ask further questions: In all this, where is the place of the sovereignty of God? What role does the efficacy of the cross play? What is the meaning of Christian discipleship, and so on? In response, Acolatse diagnosed people's need for freedom, whose gotten through group prayers with efficacy coming from God and not from any person or the group. Conclusions drawn are that Jesus has power over Satan and will always do. Anyone who believes and keeps his word will heal in his name. Acolatse (2018:5) makes strong statements like "African Christianity has yet to truly transcend its cultural moment." She notes further that to attain/achieve this, one needs "a more complete biblical anthropology that reflects a more Christological approach". She finds Christological theology in Karl Barth, since his approach meets her African notions properly lived. She notes that Barth takes three dimensions: God, self and others and relates to one another and to God who created us in the divine image of Father, Son and Spirit.

Applying her findings to Pastoral care pervades Acolatse's writings. As a pastoral counsellor, Acolatse (2014:81) describes that Ghanaian pastoral counselling today is a mixture of African Traditional Religions (ATR), cosmology from the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT), which authenticates the people's worldview. The world is portrayed as full of evil and Jesus comes with overwhelming power to subdue it. A pertinent question could then be asked: How can Ghanaians be set free from this fear and get the hope Jesus offers? Acolatse uses Karl Barth to present handy responses: **a)** African Christians seek to understand self through the scriptures. This understanding has to strip itself of the fear that comes from the ATR. **b)** Barth has ordered a relationship between theology and culture and his theology is closely allied with the practices of the Church (Acolatse, 2014:81). His discussion on human's true nature has important implications for pastoral counselling in the African context. The blend of theology and culture has to be smooth before the pastoral counselling could be effective.

## Analytical Psychology

Acolatse begins her understanding of analytical psychology by defining cosmology as the worldview and way of responding to crises. She analyses psychological aspects of the causes of bondage. Africa has a high religious worldview. In order for the gospel to be meaningful it must be contextualised. African cosmology should go hand in hand with its Christian theology. That is when the African can truly live out its Christian life in the context of Africa and as an African (Acolatse, 2014:38).

Ghanaian Cosmology is seen vis-à-vis the Gospel. Here Acolatse uses worldview and cosmology interchangeably to mean “the deep underlying structure and logic of a people’s way of living in the world” (Acolatse, 2014:38). The Anlo and Akan people of Ghana make her main focus here. How does their worldview affect pastoral theology, analytical psychology and consequently counselling? The pastor needs first of all to be inserted in the culture and then with the understanding of the people’s way of life and psyche h/she will be able to give the necessary care needed.

### *The Anlo and Akan Cosmology as Basis for Pastoral Care*

Acolatse traces the Anlo and Akan Cosmology to ascertain the similarities and differences in their worldviews. The Ewe (Anlo) are about seven million in population; and they could be found in Ghana, Togo and Benin. They believe in a hierarchy of beings: “a personal Supreme-Creator- personal spirit powers- human ancestral spirits and an impersonal all-pervasive power” (Acolatse, 2018:39). She compares this world view to that of the Akan. This covers Ghana and Ivory Coast. There are about fifteen subgroups but they have a common ancestry. The Akan believe in a Supreme Being-Creator and a universe full of spirits. The Supreme Being is so far out that could only be reached by intermediaries – the pantheon of gods or sons of the Supreme Being or minor deities (Acolatse, 2014:57). The Ewe and Akan have different names for God, Mawu Lisa and Nyame, respectively, however, the Ewe supreme being is both male and female (Acolatse, 2018:39). The Supreme Being is so far out that could only be reached by intermediaries – the pantheon of gods or sons of the Supreme Being or minor deities (Acolatse, 2014:57). Acolatse (2018:40) avers that both the Ewe and Akan believe in spirit beings that are

active and infiltrate the life of the community. This way, they affect individual and community lives. Worship in the community is communal and ritualistic; while sacrifice and prayer are important. Similarly, the Ghanaian-Christian bath is carried out at the beach at dawn for individual members of the community (Independent Churches). Acolatse sees salvation as material wellbeing, with peace as a sure sign of salvation: *nnut*; (*anlo*) *fafa* and *ahuntor* (*akan*)- ‘cool, calm body’ whose quietude spills over. To counter the malevolent spirits, Acolatse (2014:48) notes that there is belief in forces that shows up in magic, medicine, sorcery and witchcraft. Prevalent is the belief that witches need a family member in order to attack the family as the saying goes, “something that bites you must come from your cloth”. Acolatse (2014:48) relates that these beliefs influence pastoral counselling making it purely psychic or somatic issues are treated spiritually. This can be and is often detrimental to the care seeker. She further state that the great preaching of prosperity gospel makes “Christians attribute any failure to possible demonic activity” (Acolatse, 2014:57). The people seek antidotes to witchcraft in the form of herbal medicines. There is also the ‘Christian version’ of these antidotes in anointing. Prayer and fasting are accompanied by anointing in severe cases.

Acolatse (2014:145) opines that a Jungian perspective of the African theological anthropology discloses that it is not every problem that is in the psychic. This analytical psychological theory is guided by the understanding of the archetype. Dreams can manifest patterns in myths and fairy tales in diverse cultures. They are fairly universal and Jung calls them collective unconscious. Acolatse cites Jung who says further “that the psyche in its natural state tends toward wholeness...each individual strives toward becoming whole, individuated, undivided” (Acolatse, 2014:145).

### ***Jung’s Paradigm for Wholeness of the Self within Christianity***

Acolatse (2014:161-162) addresses African anthropology in the light of Jungian analytical psychology stating that therapy is to help one maintain a balance necessary for wholeness. She argues that when an emotion is suppressed consciously or unconsciously, it manifests in some other way. That could be why some counselees do not get immediate solution to their problems, or at all. It is pertinent therefore that problems be



properly diagnosed so an appropriate solution could be rendered. Psychology and religion are to bring wholeness to people but they approach this wholeness through different methods and manners, African pastoral theology should bring about this collaboration (Acolatse, 2014:160). Acolatse argues further that when we offer only theological explanations for paranormal behaviors then parishioners naturally expect a spiritual cure. In the present African context, where pastors address paranormal phenomena from a theological perspective, pain, doubt and sometimes confusion arise when prayers for a cure go unanswered. This pain grows more acute when people assume that the individuals seeking a cure do not have enough faith to receive the required healing or that sin in their lives causes their ailment (Acolatse, 2014:155).

### ***Possession States and Other Paranormal Behaviour***

Acolatse identifies that “Some of the phenomena generally termed possession are actually altered state of consciousness” (as Acolatse quotes Shuster, 2014:187). Different churches approach demon possession differently: Independent Evangelical Churches perform rhythmic dancing, drugs, drumming, hyperventilation to heal the possessed; while Roman Catholic, Anglican, African Independent Churches burn incense (with hallucinogenic properties). Apart from interventions in churches, Acolatse identifies that some Ghanaian meals contain spices which, when inhaled can induce the brain to manifest signs of possession. She adds that loud music could result in extreme forms of behavior; some people by mere watching can tend to behave like the possessed (Acolatse, 2014:188). Acolatse further observes that “Sometimes the suggestion of an individual that he may be possessed by a demon seems to induce the possession state” (Acolatse, 2014:189). She also notes that at times “whether exorcism will work or not sometimes depends finally on whether the individual wants to be cured” (Acolatse, 2014:189). Thoughts are called into being and what people think are believed to happen (to them or to others).

## **Acolatse's Views on African Christian and Pastoral Counselling**

At present pastoral counselling understands that humans are body, soul and spirit. Issues about humans pass through the spirit and pass to the body and soul. Independent Evangelical churches believe deeply in this and it plays on their interpretation of scripture. They believe that Jesus understood diseases as spiritual problems thus needing spiritual interventions (Acolatse, 2014:111). The pastor then sees the need to link biblical worldview to African worldview. But not all problems go away with exorcism and this makes the care seeker dependent and on intense search for the correct “man of God”. Care seekers then have to be careful to avoid evil spirits who seem to be everywhere. Since the Bible has not a single cosmology African Christians should rather see in it the liberating message for pastoral practice.

She laments that Evangelical Christians continue to believe that willingly and unwillingly Africans participate in the sins of their ancestors (Acolatse, 2014:142). Such beliefs assume that it takes a special grace by a special pastor to deliver one from this. One wonders if baptism in Jesus Christ is not enough to deal with and take care of this. These evangelical Christians misquote Mark 9:29 and Matthew 17:20, taking it out of context and using it as support. For Acolatse, Christians using Jeremiah 31:29-30 should rise to their individual responsibilities because each person has a personal question to answer (cf. Ezek. 18:1-32). If the New Testament Gentiles whose culture resembles the Africans' did not have the same problem, why do the Africans have? Is their demon more powerful than the New Testament Gentiles' demon?

Acolatse (2018:192) identifies similarities between Biblical and African worldviews, as believed by pastors and parishioners. Such affinities require that attention should be paid to each component of the human being in pastoral practice. Acolatse elucidates the point thus:

What the church in Africa needs therefore, is a conceptual framework with which to rene and sharpen its theological anthropology, so that instead of supporting a cosmology that perpetuates a climate of fear and bondage, pastoral theology might better bring the promised freedom and healing of Christ to ailing people (2018, 192-193).

Acolatse (2018:197) goes ahead to give a theoretical framework for counselling. She asserts that the efficacy of the redemptive work of Christ depends on the power and integrity of the God who redeems rather than on the faith of the care seeker/a parishioner (see Gal 3:29 and Eph 2:6-8). For her, God calls all believers to be in relationship with the Trinity. She notes that “If human beings are besouled bodies and embodied souls undergirded by God’s Spirit, then...it would be preposterous even to suggest that evil spiritual powers can affect human beings through their spirit”. Acolatse (2018:197) contests that if they understood this, pastoral counsellors would not base their diagnosis entirely on spiritual causes; they would search for psychic and somatic causes also. The finished work of Jesus shown forth in the Christ-event and its implication for our yesterday, today and tomorrow is manifest in Barth’s theological anthropology (see Matt. 5:45; Rom 5:8).

## **Main Theological Contribution of Acolatse**

Professor Esther Acolatse’s main purpose in her works is to provide a guide towards pastoral counselling. From her experience of culture and case study she creates an aid and a dash board for present and future prospective pastoral counsellors. She advocates the awareness of the wholeness of the human person; not just the spiritual aspect. She advises that the pastoral counsellor should find out the current trends and apply an appropriate method in order to help better.

Also, Acolatse’s contribution can be relevant to the universal church that Christian theology should transcend culture in as much we all come from different cultures. The church is one and the goal for Christian theology should be centered on relationship with the Trinitarian God. It may be a difficult task but the meaning of the vicarious death of Christ on the Cross grants victory to relate with the Trinitarian God and to find help that Christians need in an oppressive world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The work has attempted to show the contribution of Esther Acolatse to Liberation theology. It situates the Matriarch within the first generation of African Women theologians who came together to form the Circle. The paper

has established that the focused on Acolatse's diagnosis of pastoral counselling in Africa using Ghana as a case study. There is an in-depth study of theological and psychological perspectives of the situation. Looking at Acolatse's profile, it gets clear that she is truly African, Christian, with a wide experience especially in the United States of America. In her writings, Acolatse underscores that soul-care therapy suggests that care-givers must understand the religious context of the care seeker and in care-giving, they do not need to alienate the care-seeker from this background. Also, her research on pastoral care to men and women in marital conflict suggests that no substantive spiritual growth has been derived from service and submission to a nonreciprocal relationship. Such relationship is neither theologically adequate nor psychologically functional. Also, from the survey of different pastors and parishioners interviewed, Acolatse concluded that theological anthropology and analytical psychology placed side by side with the Bible and African Traditional Religions further disclose the African worldview. This is embedded in the culture and cosmology. Also, the faith of the individual, and the power of God together play a very important part in a counselee's wellbeing or not. One therefore, has to be truly African and Christian; be attuned to one's components of body, soul and spirit in order for the pastoral counselling to be effective. In this case, the fear of demons, other less powers like one's sins weighing one down and causing one's sickness are overpowered. Jesus Christ then becomes seen and affirmed as the only super power for one's needs. Acolatse suggests that every care-giver/counsellor should be armed with Barth's theological anthropology and Jung's analytical psychology, so as to meet the needs of care seekers. With these they have an indispensable conceptual map to diagnose and bring healing to troubled persons. Pastors should realise that diagnostic tools are mere guidelines and should be used as such.

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## 19 | NEGOTIATING DEVELOPMENT: CONTRIBUTIONS OF GHANA MUSLIM MISSION WOMEN FELLOWSHIP

*Fatimatu N-eyare Sulemanu*

### Abstract

The contributions of Muslim women in society have manifested in varied ways throughout Islamic history. Muslim women have contributed significantly to the development of Islam in its formative years. Yet, due to ignorance, misinterpretation of texts, mediation of Islam by *ulama*, traditions and culture, the rights of Muslim women and their active participation in the development of Muslim societies declined. Since the early 1990s, Muslim women in Ghana have contributed in diverse forms to the holistic development of the Muslim ummah. However, the dominant connection of development with economic growth diminished the immense contributions of Muslim women to development in Ghana. Using in-depth interview and focused group discussions, the paper does an analysis of the activities of one Muslim women group, which reveal the multidimensionality of development. This paper argues that Muslim women groups have contributed significantly to the discourse and praxis of development within the context of Islam. On the whole, the paper will contribute to the discourse on Muslim women and development in Ghana.

**Keywords:** Islam, Muslim women, Development, Ghana

### Introduction

Ghana's quest for development – socially and economically – has been one of the main aspirations behind the country's decolonization agenda. Nkrumah's declaration that Ghanaians should seek the political kingdom and everything else will follow will cast within the realm of development (Buah, 1998). His understanding was that, once Ghanaians got rid of the colonialists, Ghanaians could determine the contours of their development. Indeed, independence brought some gains to the Ghanaian community. In the early days of postcolonial excitements, Nkrumah embarked on ambitious programmes, including the building of schools and

the construction of the Akosombo dam, which engineered confidence in the Ghanaian masses that really independence was the best for the nation (Biney, 2011).

However, at the turn of the 1960s, things began falling apart (Killick, 2010). Corruption and partisan politics merged to suffocate the nation (Killick, 2010). In response, several attempts were said to have been made by a few individuals to overthrow Nkrumah. In his response, Nkrumah passed several laws that suppressed political freedom and eventually led the country into a one-party state in 1964 (Gocking, 2005). The masses' dissatisfaction with Nkrumah's regime heightened, resulting in the military and the police, backed by the America CIA, toppling the Nkrumah's regime in 1966 (Gocking, 2005).

Since 1966, Ghana was thrown into cusps of military coups, until the regime of Jerry John Rawlings in the 1980s. As a military leader, Rawlings succeeded in stabilizing the country's freedom, including reports of his violation of human rights, until internal and external pressures compelled him to re-democratize the country in the 1990s (Aidoo, 2006). Since the 1990s, the country's search for socio-economic development has been a usual outcry. Much as the country's developmental challenges has a long history going back to the colonial exploitative regime, the country's introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s rendered life very difficult for several Ghanaians (Donkor, 2019).

Consequently, at the time Ghana was re-transitioning to democracy in the late 1980s, the Rawlings' Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) extended invitation to every Ghanaian constituency, including the religious ones, to contribute to the nation's development. In response, the various religious groups responded. Nevertheless, given the historic marginalisation of women's voices and their contributions to human flourishing, the role of Muslim women and their organizations has hardly had the deserved attention. Even if it had been discussed at all, their role as social activists, socializers of children, educators, are less considered as development issues.

In this paper, therefore, my goal is to participate in the conversation on development, highlighting the fault lines in the construction of development as economic enrichment. I will point out how concentrating on

materialism as development tends to obscure the critical roles Muslim women play in advancing the “common good” in Ghana. Considering that my discussion takes Islam as the focus of discussion, I will look at what Islam considers as development and how women are not left out in the attainment of Islamic vision of human flourishing. I will then narrow the discussion to the contributions that the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship (GMMWF) has brought to the frontiers of development.

## **Islam, Women and Development**

Religion remains very pervasive globally. Contrary to the predictions in the 1960s that religion would fizzle out under yoke of modernity and modernization, religion has surged back strongly since the late 1970s (Cox, 1965). The idea of religion having staged a comeback has been concretized in the title of John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s co-authored book, *God is back* (John and Adrian, 2009). The title of the book is itself revealing of a certain understanding that God had gone into hibernation. Nevertheless, whether in the West or East or Africa, God has always been present – He never went anywhere to even think of coming back. What may explain the idea that God may have gone into a quiet mode was the lingering impact of the nineteenth century western flirtation with its enlightenment – which assumed that religion must liberalise or cease to exist. Religion may have liberalised to accommodate some elements of modernity, such as religious use of technology – but in Africa religion remains very strong. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity and Islam had not completely taken over several countries in Africa. But by the middle of the twentieth century, Africa had become the stronghold of the so-named Abrahamic religions (Jenkins, 2002).

Even so, the idea that there is a surge in religion is not also to say that religion remains what it has always been in terms of ecclesiastical unfettered control. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the spread of religions, particularly Islam has had significant impact on the extent to which the religion has accommodated indigenous cultures. In Ali Mazrui’s insightful analysis, he observed that the penetration of Islam into “black” Africa was more economically driven than politically motivated (Mazrui, 1985). This



means that until the nineteenth century, when Osman dan Fodio launched his reformist jihad in Northern Nigeria, the spread of Islam was mediated by itinerant Mande Dyula and Hausa traders (Trimingham, 1970). These traders were interested in their business and hardly entangled themselves in local politics. The elites *Mualims* or religious scholars who followed these traders were employed as administrators in the emerging Western African medieval kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. In the sixteenth century, the Mole-Dagbani kingdoms of what is now Ghana incorporated Islamic clerics in their state formation (Levtzion, 1968).

Islam in these Mole-Dagbani kingdoms became readily identifiable with local cultures. The important point to mention here is that the Mole-Dagbani people did not give up on their indigenous cultures, even though they assimilated Islam into local governance. The implication of this was that the indigenous understanding of gendered relations concurrently got typified as Islamic version of womanhood. Meanwhile, the Islamic view of women is historically and socially discursive. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), women have played important roles in the establishment of the Islamic *ummah* – the Islamic community. As a nascent community, women's role as mothers and nurturers was considered highly relevant in ensuring the continuity of the faith. *Tawhid* (Unity of God) is the foundation of Islam which teaches the Oneness of God as the Sovereign and Creator of all things. It articulates the Islamic world and defines the basis of knowledge, social action and social organization (Kounsar, 2016). It expresses equality of humankind in the sight of God the ultimate source of value and knowledge. Framed as part of the Islamic creation account of and women were not considered inferior to men and their roles in society were not also considered any lesser to their male's counterpart (Barazangi, 2004).

Similarly, as part of the Islamic idea of human beings as God's viceroy (*khalifat*) on earth, men and women have the same responsibility to keep law and order in the cosmos (Wadud, 2006). Nevertheless, their roles were gendered, but not rated in terms of quantity – such as whose work was more important than the other. From the Islamic perspective, men and women, playing different roles, complement each other, rather than

compete, to advance the Islamic *ummah* (Badawi, 1976). For this purpose, men and women participated in education and religious rituals of the five pillars of Islam (shahadah, salat, zakat, Saum Hajj) in the same sense to derive ultimate inspiration and guidance from Allah to undertake their respective responsibilities. Girls and boys were therefore not discriminated against in their pursuit of knowledge; men and women also had equal access to God – though their roles in the mosque may also be gendered. But before God, men and women are the same in their search for piety (Barlas, 2002).

Consequently, Islam greatly reconstructed the social environment of the pre-Islam Arabia, where androcentric and male-centrism had marginalized women. Until the advent of Islam, women in the pre-Islamic world – often called *Jahiliyya* to mark the first century before Islam – were not part of state governance; as a society ridden with feud, women’s non-military role was considered a bane to society (Hitti, 1970). For all this reason, the rise of Islam marked a major shift in the lives of women and the reformation of the Arabian society. Consequently, women actively participated in public life during the time of the Prophet (SAW) and that of the orthodox caliphs (Kamali, 2015).

It is against this background that several Islamic scholars have contested the attempt by some male Islamic scholars to impose inferiorization and marginalization on Muslim women. These ulama’s treatment of gendered roles in Islam as fossilized in history is a product of the nineteenth century when the Islamic civilization showed signs of collapse. To grip their hold on priestly control, several male *ulamas* are believed to have imposed culturally-informed gendered assumptions on Islam.

Returning to the West African sub-region, therefore, the African agency in the introduction of Islam mainstreamed indigenous gendered relations into the religion. Women had to subsist under the guise of androcentric control. The situation was almost worsened by the slave trade and colonialism (Roberson and Klein, 1997). Both the trans-Saharan slave trade and the trans-Atlantic slave trade rendered the position of women very precarious. Women were the easy target as forced labourers, pawns or sex objects in the slave trade (Roberson and Klein, 1997). Again, under the guise of protecting women against slave traders, men deepened and firmed their control over women.

Similarly, given that the missionary regime of the nineteenth century coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria of England, who was bent on restoring Christian ethics into the public sphere in England and the colonies, women had yet another layer of experience (Van Wyk Smith, 1972). What became known in feminist scholarship as Victorian concept of womanhood was routinized through gendered mission education that prepared women for domestic roles and men for public roles (Oyewumi, 1997). While the missionaries may not have had a bad intention for this gendered education, at the time of independence in several countries in West Africa, including Ghana, women's representation in politics was very low. In the Islamic regions, the *Madrassa* education was open to all, but most women had to give up on their education to marry, once they attain what society considered as marriageable age. Again, on the Islamic front, at the time of independence, several countries in West Africa could only boast of a handful of women Islamic scholars.

The impact of the above is that men came to define what development is. As public workers, men conceptualised development as public activities. Women's domestic roles were hardly rated and valued as development. Given this, women's activities in supporting human flourishing had hardly attracted attention. The situation is even dire for Muslim women in Ghana. Much as women have played critical roles in supporting Ghana's economic recovery since the 1990s, scholars have choreographed themselves from women's roles. It is for this reason that I dedicate the next section discussing the role of the Ghana Muslim Women Fellowship (GMMWF). I will provide a brief historical background of the group, their mission, activities and how they are re-negotiating the public sphere to engender growth in Ghana. To contextualize my analysis, I will draw from Islamic perspective on women's position in society.

## **Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship (GMMWF)**

Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship was founded in 1967 as the Women's wing of the Ghana Muslim Mission, an indigenous Ga Muslim Organization. It is non-doctrinal, multi-ethnic, apolitical and non-profit organization open to all Muslim women in Ghana. It has an active membership of about 1000 which consists of literate and non-literate women

between the ages of 25-75 years. Through the dynamic leadership of the founding members, the group has founded branches in six other regions in the county. The Greater Accra branch which is the focus of this discussion is made up of seven (7) sub-branches. Its main objectives are to educate Muslim women about Islam, promote holistic education for Muslim children, support the needy and the poor in society and promote peaceful coexistence with other women groups both Muslims and non-Muslims. It has a well-defined leadership structure made up of 8-member executive committee, for effective administration of the group. Their activities reflect the mission and vision of the Ghana Muslim Mission, which is to promote unity among its members and produced a well-educated and disciplined, spiritual and healthy Muslim community who shall live by the principles of the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) to contribute towards national development. To this end, it is envisioned to be the most vibrant Muslim organization which strives for the socio-economic, moral, spiritual and intellectual development through the provision of education, health and other social infrastructure. The mission and vision of the GMM underpin the activities of the women's Fellowship.

### **Activities**

Having understood the implication of *khalifahip* for education, the Women's fellowship engaged in educational activities in its varied forms to educate their members. Through their own ingenuities, and with assistance from an Islamic NGO, Islamic Council for Development and Humanitarian Services (ICODEHS) in 1998, constructed a four-classroom block which accommodates the kindergarten department of the Hijaz Islamic basic school, one of the Ghana Muslim Mission Islamic schools in Accra, and have also contributed to build one nursery block each in the Central and Western regions respectively. As mothers, the Women's Fellowship is concerned about the training of Muslim children, and nursery and kindergarten departments are important as they provide a firm basis for the moral foundation of children in their formative years. For members of the Women's Fellowship, therefore, development is about giving one's child holistic education which reflect their own development as mothers.

As part of the strategy to informally educate their members, through the use of conferences, conventions, seminars, workshops and symposia, the group has reached out to a large number of women to educate, preach, enhance spirituality, do advocacy and raise funds for their projects. They also discuss contemporary social and religious issues which affect the development of women. The conferences also provide opportunity for the group to demonstrate kindness and generosity as they donate food, clothes, toiletries and other essential items to the needy, poor and the vulnerable in society, as part of the human development agenda.

The non-formal educational activities of the group include the weekend Islamic classes where they are educated on the proper observance of the Islamic daily rituals as essential element of human development in Islam. These classes have also been used to provide vocational skills in soap and bead making, Batik, weaving and catering for the economic empowerment of the members. The women are also educated on time and home management for efficient use of their time as mothers, and wives. Again, through preaching, members have been taught moral lessons which has transformed attitude and behaviour for moral and spiritual development. Significantly, the used of indigenous languages have enabled effective teaching, preaching and communication which mirror the pedagogy of wisdom preaching stated in Q 16:125. Closely linked to the use of indigenous language is its use in the composition of songs to explain various aspects of Islam. The songs have been innovatively used to raise funds for projects in a competitive manner as well as for evangelism. It is therefore not surprising that their financial contribution has immensely sustained the active existence of Ghana Muslim Mission. The women's fellowship is the longest existing Muslim women groups in Ghana that has stood the test of time.

Despite the manifestation of the Christian influence in the formal uniform for functions, the mode of dressing of the women fellowship is informed by the desire to maintain their cultural identity as Ga/Akan and practice the faith without any form of Arabization. It is also used to distinguish them from the non-indigenous Muslim women who hitherto discriminated against them as pervert in Islam. Essentially, modernization and technological awareness had led to the proliferation of digital station with female participation as hosts which created other platforms

for Muslim women. The Fellowship uses the electronic media to perform *da'wah* (propagation) activities on popular programmes on Television and Radio such as Aqeedah, An-Nissa etc. Through the media, they have helped to remove the stereotypes non-Muslims have about Muslim women. All these helped the better appreciation of Islam and affected behavioural change towards female education hence development. As Ahmad (1979) avers, Islam implies efforts, struggle, movement and renewal, all of which constitutes social change.

### **Women as Negotiators of Change**

Development has had different shades of meaning and conceptualisation. In much of Africa, development is equivalent of westernization and modernization – embodied in material progression (Gyekye, 1997). Nevertheless, the western notion of development is not universally shared. This is also because, development as economic enrichment, other than shared social values to foster inclusive society has rather stimulated multidimensionality of exclusion (Sen and Nussbaum, 1993). In his philosophical foundation of development, Khurshid Ahmad (1994) elucidates that Islamic development is rooted in *tawhid* which teaches the Sovereignty of God over all things with humankind as the *khalifah*. So, entrusted with *Khalifahship* and naturally imbued with responsibility to develop morally, politically, economically, socially and spiritually within the *ummah* towards *Tazkiyah* i.e.; “purification and growth,” the human being becomes the focus of development. Thus, the Islamic understanding of development is value based and human oriented. Consequently, the Qur’an, has mandated women to self-actualize as independent individuals and also provide leadership to enable holistic development of the *ummah*. *Khalifahship* is thus, permeated with different elements with leadership and education as salient components. Wadud (2006) espouses that inherent in the agency of humankind, is the conscious recognition of choice and its exercise to fulfill the purpose of creation and cultivate the mental faculties through education and deep reflection on the signs of God (Rabiatu, 2015). So, women as *khalifahs*, with full rights, responsibilities and obligations to self-actualize are also called to social action through practicalization of *Amr bi maruf wa nahy an Munkar* (advocating what is right and

eschew what is wrong as stated in Q 3:104). Women of the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship, individually as wives, mothers and daughters and collectively as a group, have appropriated *khalifahship* or moral agency, and freely came together to resist ignorance through different forms of education to acquire Islamic knowledge which underpin Islamic human self-development.

This resonates with the view that *khalifahship* implies continuous efforts both individually and collectively to promote development (Wadud, 2006). The objectives, and activities of the group is thus, informed by Islamic awareness and consciousness about need for proper understanding of the Quran and Islam at the individual and communal levels as a response to the call by Allah to social action for development. The attempting to live out *khalifahship* as self-development is directly linked to the development of society with the ultimate aim to achieve ‘goodness in this world and goodness in the life here after. Their understanding of *khalifahship* underpin the zeal to resist the patriarchal and several cultural / un-Islamic practices and attitudes that in several ways negatively impacted Muslim women’s lives as manifested in their illiteracy, ignorance and poverty etc; and its implication for their marginalization in Ghanaian society.

The move by the founders of the group to assist women develop holistically is a manifestation of the innate qualities of women’s leadership as expressed in the Hadith which teaches that every individual occupies a position of leadership, and would be held accountable. Having identified ignorance and lack of holistic education as the bane in development, it was not unexpected that education became a major project to embark on; for, a knowledgeable and educated mother contributes significantly to the overall development of society and in line with the oft repeated statement of the Prophet that “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers”. So, by laying emphasis on education as seen in the activities and the objectives of the group, *khalifahship* as a fellowship has sought to offer leadership to address this pressing issue. Hajia Mariama Obeng, the national chairperson of the women’s fellowship explained that, “I wanted to serve Allah and any work which is said to be for the sake of Allah, I am prepared to do and get actively involved in it, as my contribution to the work of Allah.”

Unlike the liberal notion of development which focused on economic growth, the Islamic understanding of development is interested in the holistic development of human society to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of human beings who must develop in this world and the life hereafter. Accordingly, the varied notion of development underpins its contextual understanding and application by various societies. So, the Women Fellowship in their context, negotiate their divergent visions of development within the context of globalized concepts and local discourse and practices. Islam is founded on the basis of knowledge and this was established by the first revelation (Q 96:1-5) to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). These verses commanded humankind to learn, explore and seek enlightenment which underscore the importance of learning and education in Islam (Abdulai, 2014). It is to this end that in the understanding of the women fellowship to acquire knowledge and apply it to the various aspects of human activities implies development. As expressed by some members of the group, “Development is about learning about Islam and using the knowledge to enhance your own practice of Islam. Money is development only if it can be used to help others and when you have peace of mind it is development.” Thus, their ability to recite the Qur’an and understand it well, together with the Sunnah are considered as prerequisite to development. This is because the knowledge of the Qur’an and the Sunnah are fundamental to the understanding of Islam and the ability to practice it properly (Sulemanu, 2018). Again, the study of fiqh (jurisprudence) of the pillars of Islam and the practicalization of the inner dimensions is considered as development.

As expressed by Ramatu Ankrah, “there are a lot of Muslims who do not know how to perform ablution, how to perform Salat and other basic principles and knowledge in Islam, this for me is development.” For the women, the ability to perform ablution properly having been educated on these rituals is tantamount to development because it is a prerequisite for the five-daily obligatory Salat (prayers) which serve as a reminder of the purpose of human existence and remind the women of their obligation to God, their fellow human beings and their own self-development. So, performance of the pillars of Islam; the practicalization of the inner dimensions of the rituals and the applicability in their daily lives, are all tantamount to development as far as the women are concerned.



As the critical mass of every society, women are regarded as the custodians of social norms and values that lead to peace and development in society (Zagoon, 2018). Thus, the conferences of the GMMWF has been used to promote peaceful co-existence with other non-Muslim women's groups such as the Presbyterian and Methodist Women's Fellowship. The GMMWF in all its conferences invites non-Muslim Women Fellowship members and not only acknowledge them as sisters in the "call to social action" but reciprocate and honour the invitation of non-Muslim Women's Fellowship. This is clearly exhibited in the patronage of the programmes and activities organized by the Thalitha Kumi Centre which has created space and brought women of diverse faiths to deliberate on issues that affect the well-being of women. This fosters good relationship and enables people of diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds to work together devoid of misconceptions and stereo-types which hinder harmonious and peaceful co-existence (Zagoon, 2018). This practice of inclusiveness is a *sine qua non* for Islamic development as it brings people irrespective of the different backgrounds together first "to know one other" as the Quran enjoins and second, for best social cohesion and national development.

## CONCLUSION

The paper discusses the status of women within the context of pre-Islamic era and how the Qur'an granted women rights which placed them in the position of responsibility as *khalifahs* to actively participate in the holistic development of human society. Even though women were subsequently denied these rights, due to socio-cultural norms and misinterpretation of text, through activism and expression of agency, Muslim women have engaged in activities which has promoted Islamic development with the context of their understanding of what it means to develop. It discusses the Ghana Muslim Mission Women Fellowship, its objectives and activities and how it has contributed to the development of its members and the Muslim community in Ghana. As an indigenous culture sensitive group, the fellowship has rallied Muslim women for effective participation in development.

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## 20 | REFLECTING ON MARTINA IYABO OGUNTOYINBO-ATERE'S INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO AFRICAN WOMEN STUDIES

*Blessing Okojie Jeffrey-Ebhomenmen*

### **Abstract**

Prof. Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere's works have provided reasons for the inclusion of women, mothers, and children in all aspects of life than being relegated to the margins. The majority of the matriarch's works are based on the oppressed woman's rights and her quest for liberation in the world and in Africa as a whole. As an African woman theologian and philosopher, Oguntoyinbo-Atere defies all odds projecting an inclusive approach to feminist theology in a world and culture dominated by patriarchy, with little or no regard for the plight of oppressed women and the poor. This work analyses and reflects on how her unique research contributions over the years, have sharpened feminist theology from her liberation approach. By adopting the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm that emphasizes the study of African issues by Africans, and issues pertaining to women by African women researchers, this better positioned the researcher to understand the plight of an African woman. The study was able to investigate the background that motivated Martina Oguntotinbo-Atere's feminist research works. The Researcher discovered that Oguntoyinbo-Atere's theological ideas are derived from her use of liberation and contextual method of hermeneutics, her uniqueness is in her inclusive theology, which emphasizes the need to include women in all facets of life. The general purpose of her research is to encourage women to reject oppression, a move that will affect the world and workplace positively, now and in the future. Oguntoyinbo-Atere's inclusive theology addresses and critiques patriarchy, and wrong interpretations of African philosophy while creating a platform for future research on women and culture.

**Keywords:** Martina I. Oguntoyinbo-Atere, Inclusive Theology, Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm, Feminism

## Introduction

Women are treated most of the time as having no voice in a world ruled by patriarchy. They are frequently denied the right they seek, effectively treating them as second-class citizens with no worth, despite their significant contribution to humanity through childbearing. It should be noted that the symbolic African woman and child is a heroic symbol that reveals her resilience and strength, not weakness. In the same vein, "African women have gone through a lot of adversities, but despite their sad history, they have become the epitome of resilience," (Lapinig & Banguiller, 2020:1041–1055).

In some secular and religious settings, they are treated as sex objects, rape victims, or off-screen managers. The pain of also facing abuse, not only from men, but from fellow women and sometimes their children, who have come to understand that their mothers are second, cannot be explained in words. The work at hand is a reflective study of Oguntoyinbo-Atere's research contribution to encouraging women against all odds to reject oppression of any form. As an African, the Nigerian setting and her prior exposure to feminist bodies provided the foundation for her works.

According to Longman and Peter (2008:152), feminist researchers work to see how women can be liberated from the patriarchal, cultural and religious control over them, given that women have historically been marginalized and denied access to positions of authority and influence. Furthermore, feminist academics frequently feel compelled to depart from the text and raise issues with both what the Bible says about women and its underlying assumptions regarding gender (Longman & Peter, 2008:153). The method employed by the researcher is the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm which gives room for African women to research on issues concerning women by deliberately combining Afrocentrism and Womanism (Amenyedzi, 2021:171).

## Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm

The development of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm could be attributed to the efforts of the Rev. Dr. Seyram B. Amenyedzi (2022). The

methodology "places a strong emphasis on the study of African issues by Africans and issues related to African women by African female researchers." (Amenyedzi, 2022). The inclusive approach to feminism which Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere uses is the subject of this work's reflective research. By Inclusive approach the researcher meant a platform where women who were formally excluded from norms could participate.

The necessity of this methodology lies in the fact that "if African stories are told by Africans through their cultural lenses, they will be more relevant as they are better conceptualized and contextualized" (Amenyedzi, 2022). The Afrocentric research methodology proposes that Afrocentrism and Womanism are two opposing but related conceptual frameworks that can be juxtaposed as a single framework for researching the African woman within the African environment. African research is conducted by Africans inside our pertinent cultural paradigm. While womanism is limited to African women, Afrocentrism covers the breadth of African research inside African civilizations via the eyes of actual African people. Amenyedzi proposes that womanism which is also known as black feminism engage African women as having their unique experiences which cannot be fully understood in the large context of feminism (2021:171). Although womanism, share similar cause with feminism in the aspect of liberation and recognition of woman, womanist unique features is its determination to look at peculiar African woman issues "aside the general discrimination faced by women, they must also deal with the numerous obstructions, particularly those associated with racism sexism and classism" (Amenyedzi, 2021:171). The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm offers a framework where the researcher can deliberately investigate distinct facets of an African culture in relation to the condition of women in various circumstances within the same culture. The issues reflected on by Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere make this paradigm relevant to this study. Afrocentric Womanist Paradigm has six systematic guide lines of researching the African woman and they are:

1. What is the African context?
2. What are the essential components of the culture?
3. What is the religious view of the woman in this context?
4. How are women appreciated in this context?

5. How does the situation in question affect the African woman?
6. What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how will that influence the appreciation of African women? (The focus is on both indigenous knowledge system-IKS and or reformed/ reformulated praxis). (Amenyedzi, 2021:172)

## **Biodata of**

### **Professor (Mrs) Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo – Atere**

On September 31, 1965, Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere was born in the home of Pa Matthew Babakayode and Mama Lydia Adunn Oguntoyinbo. She was a student at Yekim's St. Mary's Primary School (1970-1980). She received second place in the Atakumasa Local Government's Children's Day Essay Competition (1979). For her A' Levels, she attended the now-defunct Oyo State College of Arts and Science (OSCAS) from 1981 to 1983. She was admitted to the University of Ilorin in 1987 and the subsequent 1986/1987 semesters.

She earned a B.A. (Hons) in Christian Studies in 1987. During the 1987-1988 Academic year, Oguntoyinbo-Atere was offered a scholarship by the world council of churches, Geneva in 1999 for a Doctor of Ministry Programme at the San Francisco Theological Seminary with an International feminist emphasis. In 2000, she was invited for an exchange visit in Cuba. She was a colloquium member of the 2001 Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, which was funded by the World Council of Churches. She is a member of Global Woman Doing Theology, Concerned African Women Theologians, the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), and the Society of Biblical Literature. She has taken a leading role in both women's and biblical concerns. She has participated in a number of regional and international conferences that have taken place in more than thirteen (13) different nations across four continents. She relocated to Lagos State University in 2006, and in 2008 she was made a senior lecturer. She was hired as a professor at Adeleke University in Ede in October 2012. Numerous undergraduate and graduate students have been overseen by Oguntoyinbo-Atere. She served as the University of Ibadan's Assistant Hall Warden from 1997 to 2001, the University of Ibadan's Staff Advisor for Religious Studies students from 1997 to 1998, and the Lagos

State University's Head of Christian Studies Unit from 2006 to 2010. From January 2013 until May 2014, she served as the Dean of Student Care Services at Adeleke University. In June 2014, she also served as the Dean of the Adeleke University Faculty of Arts.

She served as the Chairperson of the Faculty of Arts Welfare Committee at Lagos State University. She is currently the Dean of Student Care Service at Adeleke University. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State; Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Nigeria and others, have all used Prof. Oguntoyinbo-Atere as external examiner. Oguntoyinbo-Atere is a minister of the word and the Director of the Reformation Centre, where she ministers through audio CDs. She is married to Akinyemi Adewole Atere they are blessed with a wonderful and peaceful child, Akinbolaji Adewole Atere. (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2015)

## **Factors that Motivated Her Work**

This aspect of the work-focus mainly on two fundamental questions which are: **First**, what is the African context? This reflective study of Martina, Oguntoyinbo-Atere is majorly from the African context and taking Nigeria as the case study through the lens of religious, socio-cultural contexts of a typical Nigerian woman.

**Second**, what are the essential components of the culture? The common belief that women are solely meant to take care of the children's welfare to prevent from being nuisance in society motivated her research into issues connected to women's wellness (Oguntoyinbo, 1981:1). Women's education was traditionally thought to end in the kitchen, which played a significant role in why they did not receive formal training until very recently. Seeing women as property was not unusual in an African culture where women are viewed as things to be acquired as long men have the resources to take care of them. Souza as cited by Lapinig & Banquiller describes what an African woman has to go through, "To know oneself as a black woman is to live through experience of having been massacred in your identity, confused in your views, submitted to demands and forced to adopt alien expectations" (2020:1042). Patriarchy in virtually every facet of African life is a norm and as rightly stated by Ame-



nyedzi, “anything contrary is either applauded with some “Wow” or detested with utmost fierceness” (2021:173) in the same vein, Ozyegin as cited by Amenyedizi asserts that “Patriarchy is the parallel of ideologies structures and organizational principles that reinforce subordination and oppression of women in socio-cultural institutions as men exerts power over them as a right” (2021:173). They feel that women are fragile and should not be saddled with the responsibilities of leadership.

Afolabi & Olasupo (2008) assert that only with little exemption will you find women with extra-ordinary positions in the society like the official queen mother (Iya-Oba), serving as dual kings, the queen, Iyaoja. They explain that there are some societies in Nigeria where men’s leadership is abhorred and only women are allowed to hold leadership position over not only women, but men as well (Lobun of Ondo). But it should be noted that although women occupy certain important roles in Nigeria societies, patriarchy has laid side by side these prominent women with a rigid arrogance of a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the prowess of women.

The suffering of an African child is best described in Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere's book "Victoria Top." It tells the tale of a bright young woman named Victoria, also known as Vee, who bravely overcame challenges at pivotal points in her life. From the early years of her studies until even the advanced stages, she experienced unheard-of extraordinary achievement. Her family, men, and other females who had made a decision to hate her without cause were the oppressors she had to deal with. This might be viewed as the societal context that drove her creative endeavors (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2005).

The Afrocentric Womanist paradigm further poses the question, what is the religious view of the women in this context? Once more, theologically speaking, the church that was supposed to serve as a haven and a comfort for women turned into a place where women were to be silenced and treated as inferior. Women occasionally view the Bible as a double-edged blade that can both be used to defend men's authority and free women. The formal explains that men are the dominance of Jewish culture with few prominent women. The latter is evident from how women are portrayed by St. Luke as being involved in Jesus' mission and filling significant and esteemed responsibilities (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987)

According to Oguntoyinbo-Atere, certain church leaders have fostered this mindset in the church by holding that women have no business leading or serving in positions of authority inside the church. Some of the reasons given for these attitudes are, The Old Testament have two words for women in Hebrew. "*Negeba*" means "female," while "*Issa*" means "wife" The *Issa* limits women to being wives, which may be problematic (1987:9). Israelite society perceives women in the household as mothers giving birth to children, preferably males, just like in African society. The birth of the boy was a gift from God. The people mocked the childless woman. However, some extraordinary men, like Abraham, Jacob, and Elkanah, loved their childless wives. "A helper appropriate for him" is a lady in Genesis chapter 2. This phrase may see women and men treated equally.

Oguntoyinbo-Atere was raised in a largely patrilineal environment in Nigeria, as seen by their preference for male children and their education. When a lady is unable to have a male child, she feels inadequate. Because of this, especially in polygamous families, she is mistreated by her husband, in-laws, and even co-wives. Many women who are trying to have male children end up sacrificing their lives on the altar of childbirth, leaving the female offspring at the mercy of cruel stepmothers or family members. It was believed that women's education ended in the kitchen. The federal government "has given emphasis to women's education only to encourage them," a newspaper said in 1986" (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987:9).

In addition, Koforiji Olubi, the managing director of British Electrical West Africa Company (BEWAC) Group Nigeria Ltd. and the chairman of United Bank of Africa, as well as Alele Williams, a world-class mathematician and the country's first female vice chancellor, must have had a significant influence on her writing. Mrs. Constance Agatha Cumming-John, a well-known political and social figure; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, also known as "Mama Wa"; Babatunde Ajasin; Georginia Taiwo; Gloria Omodele; and many other notable women who altered the narratives (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987:9).

## The Role of Women in Oppressing Women

In her writings, Oguntoyinbo-Atere was able to point out some women's inhumanity to fellow women as they bring down other ladies of potential qualities. It is believed mostly that women are oppressed by men who feel intimidated by their activities simply because they have a name they seek to protect, which might be under threat from exceptional women's activities. But little or no attention is given to the perturbing role of fellow women in this oppression mission. Several of her pieces address fellow women's roles. Examples can be *Women against Women*, where two characters in *Victoria Top* portrayed the role of women oppressing women. They are Vee's younger sister and Iyabo, her friend. Vee's younger sister protested not attending a meeting as long as Vee was attending that meeting, simply because she was ashamed of her looks, which did not show that she was older. Iyabo a friend turned enemy was bent on instigating everybody in the neighborhood against Vee. Although she was age mate with Vee, she claimed to be older.

Most time, low self-esteem makes fellow women to castigate and relegate fellow women to the background. These same reasons are why women vying for political positions do not get the needed support from fellow women simply because they are jealous or have been programmed by the society to question and hate successful women.

## Feminization of Poverty

The question asked here is: *How does the situation in question affect the African woman?* Oguntoyinbo-Atere opined with numerous statistics that poverty has a female face (1998:21). Most of these women though plagued with money woes and stressed by too many traditional rituals and inequalities still relied on their own strength and embraced the situation they were in. They had the courage to pursue their decisions, letting go of fear, practicing patience, and using their own adversity to help them become stronger (Lapining & Gemarie, 2020:1041). African women have experienced a great deal of adversity and misery. Women in Africa work two-thirds of the continent's working hours and produce 70% of the continent's food, but they only receive 10% of its income and own less than

1% of its property, according to an online news article titled "From dawn to dusk, the daily battle of Africa's women" (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1998:21). They put in three more hours of combined professional and household effort every day than the typical British woman does. The sooner women are acknowledged as the balance and "icing on every cake", the better for everyone.

Oguntoyinbo-Atere also discusses how poverty affects men in Africa, where an increasing number of women are in charge of running households, which leads to a decline in respect for men. Malnutrition, a lack of advancement in education, early marriage of the female child, and an endless array of social ills such as war, famine, and social vices have a profound impact on women and their offspring. According to Oguntoyinbo-Atere, the wealthy should take care of the poor and needy members of society, lest the God of seasons decide to elevate the underprivileged like Mary, Hannah and Lazarus and degrade the wealthy like the rich man in Luke's story.

## **The Purpose of the Matriarch's General Theological Thinking (Inclusivism)**

Finally, Oguntoyinbo-Atere's work advocate for a fair Nigeria and African society where women can be seen with great prowess and allowed to partake of all that they desire to do without being reminded that she is a *weaker vessel*. The question here to answer as in the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm is: *What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how would that influence the appreciation of the African Woman?* The purpose of writing is to alienate oppression of any kind faced not only by women, but children, men, and the poor class in society. Her theology has a tone of justice and liberation. Her liberation theology can be seen from a more objective approach, and her claims are not blind to reasons and reality. She truly cares about the poor and oppressed in this bleak world. Her writing so far has received recognition from reputable bodies, and it will not be out of place to say that this objectively in dealing with women, children, and men generally established her inclusive approach to feminist study. By "inclusive theology," I mean studying with objectivity issues related to women where they have been deprived of their rights.

As earlier stated, there are women of reputable positions in Nigerian societies, like the Lobun of Ondo, Iya-Oba (the kings' official mother), the queens, female revered deities like Osun of Osun state, the iconic Moremi of Ife, and queen Idia of Benin (historical figures who fought as warriors for the emancipation of their people), the women kings, and many other reputable women. If these women are accorded the respect and honor due them because of their enormous contributions to societies, women in general should be accorded respect, which will make them believe in themselves and also add to the historical fit of women in the world. The need for unbiased, deliberate inclusion of women in all aspects of Nigerian society will not only lift the country out of its current problems, but will also usher into a new chapter of development and growth.

### **Findings that Establish Oguntoyinbo-Atere's Inclusive Approach to Feminist Studies**

Oguntoyinbo-Atere is renowned for taking a strong stance against the mistreatment of women. She assertively declared in an interview she gave to the *News Paper-Tribune*, a well-known Nigerian newspaper, that "much of her writings are to urge women to reject injustice." She advocated against oppression not just for women but also for men, children, and even those who are under the control of the upper class, and the clergy. Her earlier exposure to feminist initiatives as part of Global Women Doing Theology and the Circle of Concern African Women Theologians, both of which are covered by Mercy Amba Odudoye, gave her more opportunities to realize her potential. Again, as a young African girl growing up, she was able to speak and reject oppression of any kind and even in religious settings.

Findings from her work attest to the fact that there are various tools and masks of oppression faced by women ranging from oppression from men, fellow women, religious, and political instigated oppression, social oppression and cultural instigated oppression. Her careful and unbiased analysis of these oppressions is what has established her inclusive theology of feminist study. By 'inclusive' it means allowing and accommodat-

ing women that have been marginalized and excluded religiously, culturally, socially and politically in order to maximize their potentials. To reiterate her findings in a more concise way:

1. Women have rights just like men and are answerable to God. They have to take responsibility for their own salvation.
2. A woman, when given the appropriate platform, can become the best.
3. Women are not only oppressed by men, but fellow women, because of their jealousy and inferiority complex, are also potential oppressors of women.
4. Poverty has a feminine face. Through her studies, we are able to establish the fact that every calamity and misfortune has a stronger resultant effect on women than on men.
5. Marriage in biblical metaphor-Hosea and the Ten Virgins depicts only the man and woman, with no third party-strictly monogamous. This metaphor does not apply to a large African man who acquires a woman or wife as property.

### **Suggested Ways Women can Reject Oppression**

There are several suggested ways women can reject oppression which are: **(a)** Quality Education: The education of the girl child is a liberative education not only for herself, but for her family, society, nation, and the world at large. Again, since education gets better with age, older women should be encouraged to enroll in adult classes. **(b)** There is a need for proper orientation that will stop the generational transmission of bad and negative cultural oppression of women by men and older women. This will enhance the self-esteem of women. **(c)** A clarion call for women to be role models for other women rather than complicit in women's oppression. **(d)** Women like Constance and Agatha Cumming-John can be raised in our generation to deliberately go into policies for the purpose of influencing policies that will elevate women. (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1996). **(e)** Dialogue can be a strong tool for curbing religious problems and can also be employed in solving the issue of women's oppression. There should be reasonable dialogue rather than hate and abuse from men. And

women should brave up and be able to communicate their feelings to men without resorting to silence (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2000).

## **Professor Atere's Recommendations in Relation to Patriarchy and Wrong Interpretation of African Philosophy**

Oguntoyinbo-Atere's in line with Amenyedzi studies bring to the lime-light in African philosophy that culture is not beyond critique and her general recommendation is that those cultural practices that are inimical to women's growth and development should be discarded and those that promote their wellbeing should be encouraged (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2001 & Amenyedzi, 2022) According to Odudoye, as cited by Oguntoyinbo-Atere, cultural and traditional structures, as well as misinterpretation of scriptures, have kept women in subordinate roles in church and society (2013:314). She further asserts that married Christian men abuse women who suffer silently because they are seen as "secondary elements that God has conquered for him," so they are free to beat, verbally and emotionally abuse their wives while quoting scriptures (2013:314).

The role of women in instigating cultural oppression of women has been a major concern for Professor Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere. The cold war between fellow women, rather than relating as comrades, fighting the same course of advancement of women's status in all its ramifications, is disturbing. Fellow women, who are mostly the custodians of some of the gruesome cultural practices that place fellow women in pain and subordination for life, do this without human sympathy as those who have been made apathetic by culture. These men use these uninformed, jealous, stereotyped, and apathetic women to achieve their aim of subordination and subjugation. Her writing has been able to unmask the philosophy behind these practices, like widows' rights, widows' inheritance, and other gruesome practices against women (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2001:58-71). A Study of Gomer and Hosea reveals a comparison between God and Israel in which the marriage metaphor was used just like a husband and wife. She was able to explain that the comparison made by Hosea could not be true in its entirety. Provision comes from God to man,

but not all husbands provide for their spouses. The reality, most especially in Nigeria, is that so many women are the bread winners (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2006:97-111).

Extramarital activity, which would have been inexcusable for the wife, is tolerated for the husband. Double standards highlighted the ancient Israelite woman's issues of honor at paternity in many cases. The primary offense is adulterous acts. A woman's extramarital affair is also a first-class offense in Edo State, as it is believed that the woman will bring unpardonable curse to her husband and children, possibly resulting in death. But ironically, these same men can go as far as having extramarital affairs with ladies and marrying them without the society questioning them.

Hosea can be seen as indeed a patient and loving man to have endured and had no record of marrying another woman. If only contemporary men could exercise the patience and love of Hosea, many marriages today would not end in trash, leaving the opposite spouse shattered.

It is revealed that African philosophy has in its custody some teachings that elevate the role of women in the society. A good example is from the Ifa Corpus of the Yoruba Traditional Religion in Nigeria. The corpus has it that a woman made the seventeen gods set by Olodumara, the Supreme God, to establish the order of the earth. Things didn't get strange until she was appeased by the 16th god, as instructed by Oludumare. This story does not portray women as weak entities, but ones full of ideas and potential. If Africans and the world at large can wake up to the unharnessed potential in most women, the world is certainly going to be a better place.

## **CONCLUSION**

Finally, this reflective study on Professor Oguntoyinbo-Atere's inclusive approach to feminist studies reveals her deep concern for women, the challenges they face, and the Nigerian nation as a whole. If her recommendations are implemented in our society, it will be a better and more inclusive world for women. The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm thus employed best fit the study by providing crucial answers to the components and role of culture in the plight of women in Nigeria, the role of



religion in women oppression, how these situations have not brought out the best in women but rather poverty, underdevelopment and low self-esteem, and finally given a redemptive aspect of culture in curbing this perturbing situation of a Nigerian women.

It is my recommendation that more research should be done on the role of women in oppressing fellow women and possible panaceas for curbing such in our society in order to achieve a united force among women in fighting oppression.

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## 21 | ROSEMARY EDET'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO FEMINIST THEOLOGY IN WEST AFRICA

*Yosi Apollos Maton*

### **Abstract**

The issue of leadership and ordained ministry has been a predominantly male affair in both patriarchal and religious societies. Rosemary Edet argued that Mary Magdalene ought to be accorded the title of an Apostle against the exclusively male authority presented by the church, given the criteria that, she had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, was the first to witness Christ's resurrection and the first to proclaim his resurrection. In her stand on the inclusion of women in the ministry, she says, "ministry is everyone's baptismal right, and full-time professional ministry should be about calling people to exercise that right" (Edet, 1989:88) regardless of gender. Thus, she states that exclusive male leadership "structure supports and reinforces the traditional gender based societal roles ignoring the religious leadership of African Women in the same traditional culture" (Edet, 1989:96) as well as "overlooking the Christlike understanding of authority and ministry" (Edet, 1989:96) It is within this framework that Rosemary Edet argued for an inclusive theology and the liberation of women. This work thus seeks to investigate and analyse her contribution to feminist and liberation theology in West Africa and seeks to answer questions as: What was the context of Edet's writings? What are her sources of theology? What was her purpose for writing? What are the specific and unique features of her theology? What are the issues she addressed in her theology? How had she conversed with male and western theologians? What are the strengths and contributions of Rosemary Edet's works to knowledge and liberation theology and also the weaknesses of her works? What possible application does her work have for the future? These and other questions would be dealt with in the cause of unearthing Rosemary Edet's contributions to feminist and liberation theology.

**Keywords:** Rosemary Edet, feminism, theology, West Africa

## Introduction

Rosemary Edet, writing from the Anglophone African countries perspective stated that, she cannot give a comprehensive examination of the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious context of the whole women in Africa because Africa is a large continent with vast population, with many countries, tribes and cultures therein. That despite slave trade, colonization, exploitation and those in diaspora, Africa continent is still teeming with life. According to her, a quarter of the world's population are Africans, and that America and Europe are what they are today due to “the bodies and sweat of Africans” (Edet, 1989:80).

Edet however lamented that the exodus of Africans from the continent which made it impoverished and deprived of human and material resources, that even though it has become demoralized, deflowered, abused; and it is still being exploited, oppressed and discriminated against, it still survives. In her opinion, the people mostly affected by the above-mentioned calamities are women and children e.g., Ethiopia, Angola, South Africa and other modern African countries (Edet, 1989:80-81).

Edet further highlighted that since Africa has many races and ethnic groups, who are identified by their languages, physical features and costumes, these groups have their own interests, and they work to maintain their identities, rights and privileges thus, political parties are often formed in line with these interests e.g., Uganda and Nigeria. Likewise, many socio – political, economic and religious conflicts in Africa have their root cause in tribal or ethnic sentiments as experienced in Sudan, however, Edet citing (Mbefor, 1988) said the only unifying factor now is English Language (Edet, 1989:81, 86).

Giving further background of Africa, Edet stated that politically, Africa has many political government structures – which range from (Apartheid or Colonial Rule as experienced in South Africa), A neo-colonial government (Kenya), democratic government (Tanzania) military government (Nigeria and Ghana), and Islamic government (Libya, Morocco and Algeria) (Edet, 1989:81). However, Edet noted that what is common to all these forms of government is that the masses are “excluded from deci-

sion making processes and any meaningful participation in issues affecting them, as well as in the political structures of their nation,” and the bulk of the masses are women. She said unlike other countries of the world, Africa has experienced more coups since its independence; thus, its governance is characterized by militarization as a form of political rule (Edet, 1989:81-82).

Rosemary Edet further stated that though countries in African continent have achieved some level of economic growth and development since their independence, it is still among the poorest countries of the world, thus, it is termed as “Third World.” There are human and material poverty and lack of economic progress. She blamed the unstable state of African economic and development on former colonial masters, who ensured that Africa countries remain poor and unstable for their own economic growth, and easy to exploited (Edet, 1989:82).

Edet maintained that African countries are top debtors globally, these debts ensured the enslavement and oppression Africans generations after them endlessly, since the condition of the debts made payment impossible unless the third world countries have attitudinal changes (Edet, 1989:82). Not only that, despite “economic progress and social mobilization, the economic situation of Africa shows that the masses are living in abject poverty while some very small minorities are living in affluence. (Edet, 1989:82).

### **Profile of Late Sister Rosemary Nkoyo Edet, HHCJ**

Sister Rosemary Edet, HHCJ, was first African Catholic member of Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and was also one of the members of the first International Planning Committee constituted by Prof. Mercy Oduyoye in 1988 (Kanyoro, 2012). Rosemary Edet was born on October 23, 1935 to late Mrs. Theresa Iqou Udoh, of Ikot Ansa, Cross River state and Late Mr. Edet Akpan Udoh of Ifa Ikot Okpon, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. She was the second daughter of the family of 13 children. As a baby, she was baptized and was brought up as a Methodist until 1949 when she was received into the Catholic Church, where her religious confession undergone a change and her vocation started at this period (Burial Service Program Booklet, 1993).

Sister Rosemary was a gentle and loving person who was very dedicated to God and humanity. As a trained teacher and Headmistress of Holy Child Convent School, Essene, she strongly felt that God was calling her to dedicate herself totally to Him in the Religious Life. She was received into the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus as a postulant after completion of Teachers' Training College at Ifuho on 25th January 1957. Her First Profession of Vows was on January 15, 1961. Her final Vows was on January 10, 1970. Her Silver Jubilee was on 15th January 1986. She was elected Vicar General of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus on December 18th, 1989.

Sister Rosemary Nkoyo Edet was quite in nature but she made many friends in and outside the Congregation. What she could not achieve by verbal communication she achieved by her smiles. She was noted for her few words and quick service to all and sundry. Edet put in 32 years of service in the Congregation mainly in the Education Apostolate. She was the Principal of Holy Child Teachers Training College Oron, Holy Child Teachers Training College, Ifuho, Principal, Saint Theresa's Secondary School, Edem Ekpai, Pioneer Principal of Assumption Girls' Juniorate, Ndon Ebom, tutor at Holy Child Secondary School, Miran Hill, Calabar to mention but a few. She eventually was offered appointment as a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies in the university of Calabar where she worked until her demise to eternity (Kanyoro, 2006; Funeral Service Program 1993).

Edet was a woman of principles and discipline. She was very simple, sincere, unassuming, charitable and sympathetic. She was hard-working, cheerful, soft-spoken, a woman of few words and strong personal convictions. She was a perfectionist with a warm heart. She was a woman of prayer and strong faith. She had very little time to herself, she was either doing religious and academic duties or teaching catechism to children who were preparing for the reception of the Sacraments. She was a gifted artist, and excellent seamstress and adept in the art of cooking.

Her Academic qualifications were as follows: She has First School Leaving Certificate was at Immaculate Conception Primary School, Ikot Ansa, Calabar; She obtained her secondary School certificate at Modern Secondary School, Calabar Road, Calabar, 1949 and her Teachers Grade 11 Certificate in 1954. Other educational qualifications of Rosemary Edet

are Certificate in Social Sciences; B.A. Fine Arts and English Literature; B.A. (Theology) Regina Mundi College, Rome, Italy 1974; Masters Degree from the Gregorian University, Rome 1975; Masters Degree in Religious Studies, Catholic University of America, Washington DC, USA, 1981; and PhD in the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, USA, 1983 Edet was a versatile writer and published widely in many national and international journals. Her academic achievement was steadily progressing towards a still higher cadre when she finally received the call to go back to her maker on December 1, 1993 (Funeral Service Program 1993).

### **The Context of Rosemary Edet's Writing**

Rosemary Edet was writing from the context where there is wide gap between the rich and the poor which have effects on the “social, economic, political and religious life of African countries” (Edet, 1989:82). A context where the marginalization and discrimination of women both in the socio-economic and political spheres as well as ecclesiastical structures was common place, where it has been compounded by continuous control of African continent's economy by “imperialistic powers principally through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and Multi – National Corporation” (Edet, 1989:82-83).

Therefore, she wrote to cry out against such injustice that, the “perpetual control of the African economy by super powers has placed many African countries under heavy debt crisis which makes them totally dependent upon and subject to the whims and fancies of these international institutions,” (Edet, 1989:83) which further increase poverty, and that every step taken to make African countries self-sufficient has negative effects on the social and economic life of the Africans e.g., scarcity and inflation, resulting to starvation and death, and malnutrition of children e.g., Nigeria and Ghana with the devaluation of national currencies due to IMF Loan, things became worse (Edet, 1989:83).

Another factor that aggravated abject poverty in Africa according to Edet is high rate of unemployment which caused talented professionals to migrate to the West (America, Canada and Europe) to sell their labour and to secure greener pastures, which has resulted into “brain – drain.” While those Africans who studied abroad refused to return, because of



poor work condition. Thus, African countries cannot “sustain production, growth and economic stability without assistance from powerful countries” (Edet, 1989:83) from the West. Since the talented brains and professionals who are supposed to ensure sustainability of Africa growth, economy and development are employed in Europe and America, all occasioned by the neo-colonial prejudices. More so “socio-economic and political realities of Africa have further aggravated the situation and provided additional causes for sources of social conflict, suppression of minorities, rivalries between ethnic loyalties and religion, tension within the countries of Africa” (Edet, 1989:83-84).

Edet (1989:84) further submits that though

the structures of economic poverty and dependence; uneven development within and among various countries of the region; political dominance and oppression; ideological conflict and foreign intervention persist but some movements of social and political transformation are apparent in different countries, and have constituted a major force socio-economic and political change in Africa.

Edet gave example of trade unionists in Nigeria who advocate for justice and equity; student union who demand for better condition for studies and freedom from government and military control; journalists who demand for freedom of press and the masses rights to know the truth, while human rights and liberation movements demand for liberation of women. Others are environmental movements who demand for environmental health due to dumping of toxic waste in African soil by industrial European countries (Edet, 1989:83). African women movements have formed themselves into groups and fought against oppression and injustice, and demanded for “the rights for full participation in decision – making bodies, in life and in the transformation of the religion – socio-economic and political realities of Africa” (Edet, 1989:84).

Making her submission on marginalization, discrimination and the exclusion of women from leadership and Christian ministry, Edet (1990:95) states that when the resurrection is examined in the light of

practical effect on Christian movement: We can see paradoxically, that the doctrine of bodily resurrection also serves as essential political function: it legitimizes the authority of certain men who

claimed to exercise exclusive leadership over the church as the successors of the apostles. From the second century doctrine has served to validate the apostolic succession of bishops and the basic of papal authority to this day.

Edet said that the political and religious movements of the church's authority developed along this line of biblical interpretation, and that subsequent split of churches in history are based on political and religious leadership, which contradicted Jesus' stand (Mk 10:42-44) (Edet, 1990:95-96).

Rosemary Edet narrated that when Jesus died, secular and religious leaders thought his movement had died along with him, however the resurrection "revitalized and regrouped his followers" because leadership was not their priority, rather the gospel. And from the account of the gospel writers Peter was to lead the flock (Lk 24:34; Matt. 16:13-19; John 21:15:19) – therefore peter occupied the leadership position and the early church worked with this blue print within 170 years of church movement and its existence operated bishops, priests and deacons (Edet, 1990:96), thus, women are excluded from both ecclesiastical authority and ordained ministry.

## **The Sources of Rosemary Edet's Theology**

In propounding her theology, Rosemary Edet used the Bible as her primary source alongside biblical commentaries, historical materials from the catholic theological discourses on ministry and leadership. Edet also utilized large chunks of feminist theologians' writings such as the writings of Mercy Oduyoye, Aracely de Rocchietti and Elizabeth S. Florence), as well as liberation theologians' writings (Third World theologies), African literatures and life experiences of the African people<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the sources used by Rosemary Edet are: African Novel's by Ngugi P. Clark, Achebe and Amah; Apocrypha, Bible Commentaries; Letty M Russel, Huma liberation in Feminist perspective: A Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974); Elizabeth Carrol, "Women and Ministry' in Theological Studies" – 36, No. 4. (1975), 686-687; Mercy A. Oduyoye, Paper on Women and the Churches. Lamberi, 1988, Canterbury 27/7/88; Aracely de Rocchietti,

## Specific and Unique Features of Rosemary Edet's Theology

One unique feature of Edet's theology is identifying how women have effortlessly integrated cultural and religious symbiosis by coming up with a "creative extension" and continued to enrich it and still remain free, especially in English literatures (Edet, 1989:85) in spite of marginalization and restrictions. Citing Russell (1989:92) she further stated that even though women are restricted they are working her to improve the economic, political and social life of the society (Edet, 1989:92)

Secondly, Edet strongly argued that the orthodox churches have relied on secular materials vis-à-vis its stand on women participation in church ministry, and it is biased against women on the issue of leadership and authority based on Greek philosophy of dualism. They selected only materials that support their stand on exclusivism of the male. Not only that, Edet further maintained that the tradition of exclusion of women from ordained ministry and leadership is not based on sound doctrine, rather it is based on "a sub-structure of scriptural commentaries and canonical legislation which helped men to justify their exclusivism and the women of the church to interiorize their inferiority" (Edet, 1989:89-90).

Edet went further argued that the exclusion of women from church ministry is a form of "neo-Arianism" and a double standard which destroys "wholeness of Christian community." and "hurts solidarity globally." Thus, she says, ordaining women into the church ministry should not be seen as "threat to clerical culture," rather it is beneficial to the church because it enables it to preach, teach, and emphasis on the liberative ministry as well as enhancing "representational power of the priestly service" (Edet, 1989:94, 95, 96).

Another uniqueness of Rosemary Edet theology is analogy of the feminineness of the Church; that the church is also feminine, because it is referred to as bride of God/Christ. Not only that the church is the receiver, imparter and dispenser of life, and women are partners with men in accomplishing this task and both are image bearer of God, (Edet,

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"Women and the People of God" Through her eyes (eds) Elsa. Tame New York: Orbis Books, Mary Knoll, 1985; Elizabeth S. Fiorenza. 'Feminist Theology, a critical Theology of liberation in Theological studies, Vol. 36 (Dec. 1975) 606-626.

1989:95) thus, she maintained that women should not be excluded from leadership and ministry, that “ministry is everyone baptismal right, and full-time professional ministry be about calling people to exercise that right” (Edet, 1989:88).

Another unique feature of Edet’s theology is her argument from biblical narratives that Mary Magdalene ought to be conferred with the title of apostolic authority rather than the exclusive male apostolic authority/leadership. That according to the gospel narrations, apostolic authority is conferred on to those who have received him (Christ) and were eye witnesses of his resurrection and proclaimed it (Matt. 28:16-20; Lk 24:24-29; John 20:19-23) (Edet, 1990:97) thus, Mary Magdalene ought to be one of such persons.

Though Rosemary Edet is conscious that there were many witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles were the official witnesses and official leaders of the whole community of which Peter was the spokesman of the group, because they met the above criteria (Acts 1:15-20). This claim was to replacement of Judas, of which Matthias was elected (Acts 1:21-26). Edet argued that Mary Magdalene should also be conferred apostolic authority, not only because she had been with Jesus, she was the first to witness the resurrection and the first to proclaim it instead of Peter (Mark 16:9; John 20:11-17). She argued that the limitation of authority to certain eyewitnesses has implications. It overlooked some biblical narrations like Mark and John, limits authority only to men (Edet, 1990:97-98).

## **The Purpose for Writing**

Rosemary Edet’s main purpose for writings was to establish how the literal interpretation of the gospels’ narratives of the resurrection by the orthodox churches has significant consequences for determining male leadership and authority in Christian movement history (Edet, 1990:95). She also wrote to challenge the churches in Africa to come out of their lukewarmness and complacency and be alert as they celebrate their freedom and salvation. (Edet, 1988:57) The third purpose for her writing was to examine the social, economic, cultural, political context/situation of

African women and belief, with special emphasis on women and ministry in Africa (Edet, 1989:80).

In discussing how the literal interpretation of the resurrection authenticates authority and leadership in orthodox churches, Edet stated that literal interpretation has political consequences on male leadership “it legitimizes the authority of certain men who claim to exercise exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostles” (Edet, 1990:95). Edet maintained that political and religious movements of the church’s authority developed along this line of biblical interpretation (Edet, 1990:95-96).

Edet further elaborated within 170 years of the church’s existence it operated bishops, priests and deacons’ structures bearing in mind this biblical interpretation, since the interpretation of gospel narrations conferred authority to those who received him and were eye witnesses of his resurrection (Matt. 28:16-20; Lk 24:24-29; John 20:19-23). Thus, the apostles were official witnesses and official leaders of the whole community with Peter as spoke man of the group (Acts 1:15-20), and the same claim was used to replacement of Judas (Acts 1:21-26) (Edet, 1990:96-97).

Edet opined that this line of biblical interpretation places a limitation on certain eye witnesses of Jesus resurrection and that such limitation has “enormous implication for the political structure of the community.” It means they were ‘position of incontestable authority’ which gives them authority to ‘ordain future leaders as their successors,’ thereby, totally excluding women witnesses from leadership position, overlooking the first witness of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:9; 20:11-17), who supposed to have been given apostolic authority (Edet, 1990:97).

Rosemary Edet said this line of biblical interpretation signifies that none can claim equal authority with the apostle nor challenge it, and that whatever the apostles had experienced and attested to can only be ‘believed, protected and handed down by successors’ who are male not female. She said church’s position stands contrary to the spirit of Christian movement because Jesus was very opened and inclusive towards women in his ministry. (Lk 10:38-42). Not only that, 10- 20years Christianity after the resurrection of Jesus showed that women held position of leadership in the church (Edet, 1989:97-98).

In criticizing the complacent and lukewarm attitude of the church in contemporary African setting in her interpretation of the parable of the ten virgins, Edet stated that the wedding is a sign of new age: the coming of the kingdom of God to the community and environs and it is a call for them to be happy. However, Africa must be alert for the coming of the bridegroom (Jesus) and should not be lukewarm and very complacent, waiting for a spectacular and immediate relief from troubles, rather should work it out. That some African churches who feel being saved or born again as a license to live anyhow, or condemn others should come down from their high horses because no one has monopoly of salvation, rather should be joyful and alert (Edet, 1988:57).

In her examination of the social, economic, cultural, political context/situation and beliefs of the African women, with special emphasis on women and ministry in Africa, Edet said in spite of colonialism and missionary activities in Africa, the socio-economy, and political situation of Africa still remains a point of concern, There are crisis, conflicts, abject poverty, discrimination, marginalization and untold hardship prevalent in the society and the worst victims are women and children. Consequently, churches in Africa are institutionalized to reproduce the replica of western values, structures, theology, options and problems of the missionary church and degrading, displacing or destroying Africans values and structures (Edet, 1989:100). Thus, the church continues to 'choose leaders who are male within a predominant female congregation,' thereby being insensitive to the gross marginalization and discrimination of the structure (Edet, 1989:90).

### **Issues Addressed in Rosemary Edet's Writings**

The issues addressed by Rosemary Edet in her writings include the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious contexts of women in the Anglophone African context with a very special emphasis on their place in ministry. She submitted that though Africans have experienced some level of socio-economic growth and development after independence, their growth and development is hampered by white imperialists and multinationals, which is compounded by crisis and conflicts from within the continent as well as unemployment (Edet, 1989:82).

Rosemary Edet blamed the unstable state of Africa on the former colonial masters who ensured that African countries remain poor and unstable for their own economic growth as they kept exploiting the human and material resources. However, Edet also blamed African countries for lack of self-control as they are top debtors globally, a situation where it led to forced enslavement and oppression along with generations yet unborn, since they cannot meet conditions and terms of the debts unless they have attitudinal changes, e.g., “the world bank, the International Monetary Fund and Multi – National Corporation” (Edet, 1989:82-83).

Rosemary Edet adds that the “perpetual control of African economy by super powers has placed many African countries under heavy debt crisis which makes them totally dependent upon and subject to the whims and fancies of these international institutions” (Edet, 1989:83). That the “export-oriented” production, nicknamed “Industrialization of African countries” which “aimed at making these countries self-sufficient” has negative effects on the social and economic life of the Africans – it led to scarcity and inflation, which led to starvation, malnutrition and death of children e.g., Nigeria and Ghana greatly due to IMF Loan conditions (Edet, 1989:83).

Another issue Edet addressed in her article is how foreign religions and cultures have further subjugated women they become spectators in religio-cultural and political life of the Africans. Since in most patriarchal cultures in Africa women as inferior and mere properties of their husbands, the orthodox churches,<sup>2</sup> Islam and colonial laws simply endorsed the status quo, thereby preventing women from political and religious participation in the ordained ministry (Edet, 1989:86-87). Edet argued strongly that exclusion of women from the ministry has no biblical and historical backing, rather it is a structure that “supports and reinforces the traditional gender- based roles, ignoring religious leadership of African women in the same traditional culture” (Edet, 1989:96).

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<sup>2</sup> The orthodox churches referred to here, according to the context of this writer are: the Catholic churches and all protestant churches i.e., Presbyterian Churches, Lutheran Churches, Methodist Churches, Evangelical Churches, Reformed Churches, Anglican Church of Nigeria, Baptist Churches and Church of the Brethren. These churches are replica of the founding Western Churches.

According to Rosemary Edet, that although both Christianity and Islam show concern for human life and talk of liberation, but they “re-enforced male domination in every aspect of African life.” She explained that all religions have liberating and oppressive factors in them and all preach equality of all persons and teach liberation, yet they all have “discriminatory attitudes towards women,” e.g., Christianity and Islam have barred women from leadership positions, however, in new religious movement women have liberty – they are “founders, leaders, priests, and administrators.” Though African Traditional Religion (ATR) stresses concern for human, social values, personal and communal living, cooperation, right relationships and liberation yet it discriminates against women (Edet, 1989:87).

Rosemary Edet also passionately questioned the basis for exclusive male leadership in the orthodox churches. This great scholar stated that the answer lies in the literal understanding and the interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to her, “it is within the answer to this question that the New Testament and the consequent male leadership of the church is found” It is from it the political and religious leadership developed; in other words, it is from this claim that each church leadership and movement claims to represent authentic tradition and authority (Edet, 1990:95).

In her writings, Rosemary Edet challenged the exclusion and the disregard of women as witnesses of the resurrection, thus Mary Magdalene was never ranked as an apostle even though she was the first to see the resurrected Lord and was the first to proclaim it. She stated that Orthodox Christian Movements have developed a one-sided theology and view of authority and leadership that totally disregards women witnesses, that such biblical interpretation places limitation on certain eye witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection which has “enormous implication for the political structure of the community” (Edet, 1990:97-99). This implies that the men are in a ‘position of incontestable authority’ which gave them authority to ‘ordain future leaders as their successors,’ thereby totally excluding women from leadership position, despite Markan and Johannian accounts (Mk 16:9; 20:11-17) (Edet, 1990:97-98).



Edet explained further citing Campehausen (1969) that, such line of biblical interpretation signifies that none can claim equal authority with apostle nor challenge what the apostles experienced and attested to but can only ‘believed, protected and handed down what the successors’ who were male said. She maintained that such stand is contrary to the spirit of Christian movement because Jesus was very opened and inclusive towards women during his ministry (Lk 10:38-42), while from 10-20 years Christianity after the resurrection of Jesus, women held positions of authority in the church (Edet, 1990:98).

Lastly, Edet attacked the lukewarmness and the complacent attitude of the African Churches, because they are always looking for spectacular and immediate relief from trouble instead of working out solutions – and “feel being saved or born again is a license to live anyhow, or condemn others as if we were the only ones that have monopoly of salvation. Thus, miss the joy of salvation and the alertness that should characterize the behaviour of Christian community.” The warning to repentance and the gift of salvation is for all regardless of colour, religious affiliation, tribe and race (Edet, 1988:57).

## **Rosemary Edet’s Conversations with Male and Western Theologians**

Rosemary Edet in her writings challenged male chauvinism on the issue of leadership and ministry, and the imposition of Western theology on the African church. She challenged the orthodox churches for allocating leadership and authority to only male in total disregard to Markian and Johannian account which shows Mary Magdalene was the “primary witness for the fundamental data of early Christian faith. She was the first to witness his resurrection and first to proclaim “Easter Kerygma<sup>3</sup>: which Christian faith is based upon the witness and proclamation of women”

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<sup>3</sup> The orthodox churches referred to here, according to the context of this writer are: The Catholic churches and all protestant churches i.e., Presbyterian Churches, Lutheran Churches, Methodist Churches, Evangelical Churches, Reformed Churches, Anglican Church of Nigeria, Baptist Churches and Church of the Brethren. These churches are replica of the founding Western Churches.

(Edet, 1990:97). Not only that, Edet cites Benard of Clairvaux in (Jungmann, 1950) that Mary Magdalene witnessed the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, thus, she is an “apostle of apostles” (1990:99). Edet buttressed her point that the orthodox one-(sided view of church authority and leadership is in total disregard to women as witnesses of Christ’s resurrection, thus, subsequently, all ranks of leadership in the church were occupied by men (Edet, 1990:98-99).

Edet further addressed male chauvinism in Paul’s letters. That though he regarded women as equals in terms of image of God, salvation, and gift of the Holy spirit, but he did not “advocate for their equality in social and political terms.” She says, Paul argued from “his own traditional Jewish conception of monistic masculine God for divinely ordained hierarch of social subordination” as in (Gen 2-3), so man has authority over woman (1 Cor. 11:54), thus, women are inferior to men (Edet, 1990:98).

### **Strength and Contribution of Edet’s Theology to Knowledge and Liberation**

Rosemary Edet contributed to liberation theology by pointing out that the church has cleverly woven a shackle of bondage for women in their interpretation of the Bible as well as their theology by ensuring that leadership and authority are the prerogative of male gender alone. Citing Mary Magdalene as the primary witness for the fundamental data of early Christian faith, and the first to proclaim “Easter Kerygma: which Christian faith is based upon the witness and proclamation of women” (Edet, 1990:99) Yet, the church in her biblical interpretation and theology excluded her from leadership.

Edet further emphasized that the Orthodox churches’ exclusions of women from ministry is not based on sound doctrine, rather “that the structure of subordination of women and their exclusion from the called ministry is based on a sub-structure of scriptural commentaries and canonical legislation which helped men to the church to justify their exclusivism and the women of the church to interiorize their inferiority” (Edet,

1989:90) She said such leadership structure is based on “traditional gender based societal role not based on scriptures and she maintained that including women in ministry and leadership would enhance the ministry of the church (Edet, 1989:96, 99).

She said the feminineness of the church calls for the inclusion of women in the ministry, because it is referred to as bride of God/Christ, not only that the church receives and impacting and dispensing life, and women are partners with men in accomplishing this task – since both are image bearer of God. Thus, she called on the church to reverse its compromise with culture and be instrument of “redemptive liberation.” They should liberate women from “cultural subservience to the dominant male principle in society,” because “Christian theology does not recognize distinction between race, or sex, so full participation in ecclesial life should be open to all,” (Edet, 1989:95).

## **Weakness of Rosemary Edet’s Theology**

Though this work answered Paul’s stand on gender from Jewish perspective, yet there are still unanswered questions which need to be addressed biblically and historically. There is need to address why women were excluded in the priestly appointment in the Old Testament as well to why they were not among the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ from biblical perspective. Why has the Bible talked of male bishops, priests and deacons not female? (1 Tim. 3:1). We must not continue to shy away from the problem because these are texts often used to justify exclusion of women in the ministry and leadership in the church ministry.

## **Future Prospect/ Research**

Rosemary Edet made a call that women are “disaffected from the institutional churches who seem to be insensitive in the allocation of power”, where women are completely relegated to the background, that it is something the church needs to look into because it has seriously affected it witness, love and unity both now and the future. More so, she said, including women in the ministry and leadership will enhance the

ministerial inputs and enrich its theologies and services to humanity (Edet, 1989:93, 94).

Whether yesterday, today or the future, her writings remain relevant because the issues Rosemary Edet has raised are cancerous problem that have no immediate solution in view<sup>4</sup>. Though women have formed themselves into groups and are making great impacts in the church and society (Edet, 1989:91), yet the church is still reluctant to get them involved in ministry and leadership. However, Edet points out citing Oduyoye (1988), that the prime focus of “ministries is healing of man-woman in the church and society ..., women brokenness is brokenness of humanity” (Edet, 1989:98). She further cites (Cunningham, 1976) saying that in scripture, “ministries of both men and women were seen as manifestation of the presence and action of the spirit in the church” (Edet, 1989:89).

Edet stated further that since Africans have very high sense of community, inclusiveness should be the model of African churches and ministry rather than exclusion. There should be inclusiveness in both the Church and society. There should be equality to all people both politically, socially, and economically without sex discrimination (Edet, 1989:920).

Edet called on women to take a leaf from woman in the independent churches to reclaim women’s role and contributions in Christian faith and tradition, and free the image of Mary Magdalene from all distortions and rediscover her role as an apostolic leader. She elaborates citing Fiorenza (1975) that “the distorted image of Mary Magdalene as a sinner and penitent woman signals the distortion of self-understanding of Christian women.” (Edet, 1990:100). She stated that in order for women to rid from the distortion they must not shrink back from suffering, and “fall back into the bondage of the seven spirits of our religion and culture,” rather

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<sup>4</sup> The percentage of the Orthodox churches that see the need to include women in church ministry and leadership in Africa is still very small. So far, only Methodist, Baptist (Nigerian Convention), Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches of Nigeria ordain and accept women into to full time ministry of the word and Leadership. See Maton, Yosi A. D. *Christian Higher Education, Cultural Worldviews and the Promotion of Discriminatory Polices in the African Church, Christian Higher Education and Injustice in the African Society*. West African Journal of Higher Education, Vol.7 (Osogbo: HiRISE Celebrity Publishers 2018), 173-178.

like women should be “apostle of apostles” by being witnesses and proclaimers of the faith though orthodox denied ordination but the N.T. recognized Mary as an apostle (Edet, 1989:99-100).

## CONCLUSION

Rosemary Edet contributed greatly to liberation and feminist theology in West Africa by challenging male chauvinism that leadership and ministry is not an exclusive right of the men because such stand contradict both historical and biblical positions. She called on women to learn lessons from Mary Magdalene and women from the independent churches who did not allow barriers and restrictions to stop them from making their contribution in the church’s ministry, rather like them women should rediscover their roles in the church’s ministry and the society and make their own contributions. Edet went to rebuked the Western Churches for imposing their theology and structures on the African churches forcing them to disregard, discredit and discard everything about African as evil thus, African churches lose their value and cultures end up being replica of the western churches. However, Edet blamed the African churches for their gullibility in accepting everything from the West as the gospel truth.

Edet criticized the colonial masters that there coming to Africa added very little value to their wellbeing as compared to the mirages of problems created. That though Africa is independent, it is undergoing a neo-colonialism since the socio-political and economical structures drawn by global world powers and trade union continuously make Africans dependent on them to their own disadvantage. However, she blamed the African leaders for their greed, lack of self-control and lack of vision.

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## 22 | A MODERN-DAY LYDIA – A POEM IN HONOR OF PROF ELIZABETH AMOAH

*Georgina Kwanima Boateng*

### **Introduction**

Lydia is a disciple in the making whom Paul and Silas met in Philippi when they went there to share the Good News of Christ. A purple cloth dealer, Lydia is believed to have been a wealthy woman who was not associated with any man but oversaw her own household. She was a ‘seeker’ searching for liberation, the way to God, and she is remembered as Paul’s first European convert. After she believed, Lydia immediately directed her household to be baptized. She understood her new faith and immediately took practical steps to make it applicable (Acts 16:14-15). The author imagines Prof Elizabeth Amoah, a compatriot of the founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians like this. Prof Amoah, known as Grandma by some was instrumental in the planning and organizing at ground zero (Legon, Ghana), that led to the formation of the Circle. This is a poem to honor her primarily as a founding matriarch of the Circle.



*Grandma!*  
*All her children call her Grandma -*  
*She has a huge oikos,*  
*Just like Lydia.*

*Lydia...*  
*Who presided over her household,*  
*With grace and so much love.*

*Lydia...*  
*A God-fearing woman before she heard the Good News*  
*What ability to discern and read the future!*  
*Lydia...a woman ahead of her time*  
*For she was no ordinary woman:*  
*A woman who defines herself,*  
*She is one who takes charge,*  
*And commands her household after her.*  
*Who discovers, ventures into,*  
*And directs her household after her.*  
*A woman who organizes,*  
*Builds up structures,*  
*And calls others into her rest.*

*Like Lydia...*  
*Elizabeth Amoah, Grandma*  
*Commands a household of her own.*  
*Grandma knows who she is,*  
*She understands her worth,*  
*She looks into the future,*

*And discern what next steps.  
Grandma fears no hard ground to break.  
Indeed, she has broken grounds  
So the seeds of others might be sown  
And grow to become giant trees.*

*The giant trees are there for all to see;  
...all whom she has mothered,  
...who have been mentored by her,  
...who have had courage because of her,  
...who have dared because of her,  
...who have been shielded because of her,  
...who have found their way because of her.*

*Prof Elizabeth Amoah  
A pioneer in many ways  
You lead in the formation of a safe space  
For women in religion and culture.  
You blaze the trail for women  
In the Study of Religions.  
You lead in softening the ground  
For women in academia.  
Your name will always be mentioned  
Whenever we go back in time  
Sankofa  
We have a lot to learn from you.*

*Matriarch, we greet you!  
Grandma, we salute you!*



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BIAS 39 is an essay collection on women's Liberation Theology in West Africa, issued as one of three regional volumes commissioned in preparation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (CIRCLE) return to Ghana, its place of birth, after 35 years. The volumes rose within the context of preparing the meeting in July 2024 by remembering the founding members of the CIRCLE. The three regional volumes focus on exploring South (BIAS 41), East/Central (BIAS 40) and West African (BIAS 39) womanist/feminist Liberation Theology generated since the launch of the CIRCLE in 1989. The contributions on the lives and works of groundbreaking African women in the Theology of Liberation constitute an international, interreligious, and interdisciplinary compendium for redemptive theological research.

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ISBN: 978-3-86309-964-0



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