

MERCY ODUYOYE AS THE MOTHER OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

By

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Abstract

The article sets out to retrieve Mercy Oduyoye's life history as it attempts a survey of African Women's Theology, a theology where she is the undisputed founder. To achieve this objective, the article will address itself to the following questions: Who is Mercy Amba Oduyoye? What are the theo-philosophical concerns of African Women's Theology? Since 1989, how has African Women's Theology been propounded? In view of this, the article also attempts a survey of its historical background, its relationship with other postcolonial African theologies. As a postcolonial theology, the article argues, African women's theology offers a chance to right the African wrongs that are by-products of patriarchy – which points to the fact that African Women's theology, like African theology of reconstruction, is concurrently reconstructive and liberative in motif. By focussing on Mercy Oduyoye, as a person, the aim is to demonstrate that Africa too has theo-philosophical think tanks that also deserve to be listened to – however few they may be. It calls us to eulogize our mother Africa by encouraging the few theological thinkers to continue their good work. The material in this article is drawn from both the library research and the email interviews that I had with Oduyoye in June 2007.

1. INTRODUCTION

Who is Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye? Mercy Amba Oduyoye (nee Yamoah) was born on 21st October 1934 in Asamankese, Ghana. She got married to Adedoyin Modupe Oduyoye, a Nigeria Anglican Christian, in 1968. Mercy, a Methodist Christian, began her schooling at Mmofraturu, Kumasi, 1944-48. She later joined Achimota School Accra between 1949 and 1952. Between 1953 and 1954, she studied at Kumasi College of Technology (now University of Kumasi). She sat for her Post-Secondary Certificate of Education (Teachers Certificate A, Ministry of Education Ghana) in 1954. She was in the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra in 1959-63 where she got a B.A. (Hons.) in Religious Studies. Between 1965 and 1969, Mercy Oduyoye was studying at the University of Cambridge, UK. Here, she got her B.A. (Hons) Theology: Tripos Part III, Dogmatics (1965) and M.A. (Hons) Theology (1969).

2. MAKING A SACRIFICE AS A TEENAGER.

Oduyoye who claims that every position she has held in public life has almost always been by invitation; further claims that she made a sacrifice as a teenager; while her father assured her that God opens doors for people who care about the well being of others. Thus, instead of going for the Sixth form (Advanced level) in 1953/4 she went for a Teacher Training College so that she could be able to provide for her younger sisters while her parents went to Britain so that her father could complete his Bachelor of Divinity (BD) studies (London). Mercy Oduyoye's father, a Methodist Minister, had been interested to pursue a BD for some years without much success. This was his opportunity and Mercy was the eldest child. This meant that she had family responsibility at an early age and went to University as a mature student having taught five years after her two years teacher training. She sat for her three Principal subjects - A levels, by private studies and later obtained her intermediate BD (London) after 2 years in the Department of Divinity at the University of Ghana, Legon. Two years after that she got her BA (Religious

Studies) from the same Department after it was transformed from the previous Divinity of Religion to reflect Ghana's multi-religious status. The first door opened for her when the university sent her to Cambridge University for post-graduate studies.

In an interview with the researcher, Oduyoye revealed that she has never considered herself a church leader. For the only formal position that she has held is serving as Conference Lay preachers Secretary for Methodist Church, Nigeria (MCN), while she was teaching at the University of Ibadan while Prof Bolaji Idowu was head of the Department of Religions where she taught and later head of MCN.

She has however worked with Church leaders and observed their leadership styles thereby emulating some; and subsequently tried not to acquire the traits of some of those whom she did not admire. In her confessions, she likes to be forthright but gentle and conciliating. She feels more at home when life-styles are simple and people matter more than winning arguments and having one's way.

3. RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Mercy Oduyoye's image of responsible leadership is seen in the advise of Jesus to his disciples. That is, if one wants to be counted great, he or she must be a servant (Mark 10:44-5). For her, leadership is about foot-washing, enabling the tired and dejected to feel refreshed again so that they can pick themselves up and contribute to develop a caring, compassionate and a just community.

In Mercy Oduyoye's view, a leader is a fountainhead; one who nourishes and inspires. One who is able to respond to the needs and moods of the community. One who inspires others to give out their best to the community while making the best of their God-given talents and graces. Leaders are always found everywhere - where you find more than one person, groups of friends, and homes - right through to the Nations and groups of Nations. It is obvious then that what it takes to lead effectively will depend on the nature of the group, the context and the challenges. A person who should be counted as a good leader is one who is positioned as an enabler, mentor and collaborator, respecting the humanity of others, enabling, encouraging and appreciating their agency. In her well-considered view, Africa needs persons who have a vision for the continent, people whom we all can be proud of; and persons who have the courage to share such a vision and attract collaborators.

4. ODUYOYE AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Oduyoye became formally associated with the ecumenical movement in 1965 when she helped to host a conference of the World Student Christian Federation at the University of Ghana Legon: "Christian Presence in the Academic World." By then she had just come back from graduate studies from Cambridge University UK. Later she was to be appointed the President of the Federation. This gave her an entry point to the world of young Christians in the tertiary Institutions. She also got to understand the issues that they were espousing 1967-70, especially on matters to do with justice. At one stage she became the Youth Education Secretary, which was an appointment by the World Council of Christian Education (WCCE) and WCC. When the WCCE later merged with the WCC she was able to work directly in the Department of Education

of the WCC with Paulo Freire the Brazilian Educator. She was also able to travel all over the world familiarizing herself with out-of-school education for young people.

Between 1970 and 1974, she was the Youth Secretary for the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and her WCC youth work period was translated on to the continent. In this new position, she was able to learn a lot about Africa as she got the opportunity to see many of the countries through the eyes of the young people. From 1975 to 87 while on the faculty of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria she did a lot moderating meetings, participating in many and learning several leadership skills and roles in the ecumenical movement on the job so to say. The most challenging moderating work that she did was the section in WCC Nairobi Assembly that set up the programme on dialogue with people of other faiths. Inter-religious living remains a challenge that Africa will do well to manage wisely.

As a Deputy General Secretary of the WCC 1987-94, working with Programme Planning and Co-ordination, was a school for acquiring sensitivity and the skills of listening and honouring the expertise of many. Even after completing her term, the WCC remained her school for sharpening and keeping up the skills for working with people many of whom have more expertise than her.

It is Mercy's initiative that brought into being The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. As Initiator of the Circle, she has been instrumental in calling attention to African Women's theology and serves The Circle as the co-ordinator of its study commissions. It is in the 1970's that she started "dreaming up the Circle." She was however able to initiate it in 1989 and later Co-ordinated it for some seven years – which she describes as "a labour of love." She notes that it was teamwork and had much practise for it.

In summary, and as we have noted above, Mercy Oduyoye's professional services to the ecumenical movement, totaling thirteen years, consists of three years as Youth Education Secretary of the World Council of Churches; three years as Youth Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches and seven years as Deputy General Secretary of the World council of churches, was successful. She has served in ecumenical and theological bodies like the Standing Commission of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC and in leadership capacities in several including serving as President of the World Student Christian Federation and being the current President of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. She has served as keynote speaker at several major church and ecumenical gatherings and delivered Bible Studies at many others. She is thus an icon of our time while addressing the question on pioneers of ecumenism in Africa. For her responsible participation in academic and theo-social issues, Mercy Oduyoye has been recognised all over the world. Consequently, she got various **awards** which includes:

- Doctor of Theology honours causa Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology September 1990.
- Doctor of Theology honoris causa State University of Amsterdam January 1991.
- "Doctor honoris causa University of Western Cape (RSA) September 1998.
- Doctor of Divinity honoris causa Chicago Theological Seminary April 2001.
- Outstanding Service in Mentoring-Society of Biblical Literature 2001.

With regard to her **professional experience**, Mercy Oduyoye has served in the following areas:

- Methodist Girl's Middle School, Kumasi, Ghana, Teacher, 1954-59;
- Wesley Girl's High School, Cape Coast, Ghana, Teacher, 1965-67

- World Council of Churches/World Council of Christian Education, Geneva, Youth Education Secretary, 1967-70
- All Africa Conference of Churches, (Ibadan Office) Youth Secretary, 1970-73;
- Lagelu Grammar School For Boys, Ibadan, Nigeria, Teacher, 1973-74
- University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Faculty Religious Studies Department 1982-87;
- Assistant Editor, Orita, Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, 1974-76 and Editor 1976-87;
- Visiting Lecturer and Research Associate, Harvard Divinity School Cambridge MA, 1985-86
- Union Theological Seminary, New York, Henry Luce Visiting Professor, of world Christianity 1986-87
- Deputy General Secretary, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1987-94
- September of 1994: took the decision to concentrate on research and writing, and to undertake theological teaching on an *ad hoc* basis.
- 1996 Associate Professor, Faculty of the Maryknoll Institute Nairobi and African Studies of St. Mary's University Minnesota 1999-2001.
- 1998 to date Adjunct Faculty Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana to date.
- 1998 -Initiated and Directs the Institute of African women in Religion and Culture at the Trinity Theological Seminary Legon, Ghana to date.
- Maryknoll Mission Studies, New York July 2000
- Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Celigny Switzerland July 2000

Her **individual publications** include:

- Youth Without Jobs, Daystar Press 1972
- Flight From the Farms, Daystar Press 1973
- Church Youth Work in Africa, (Editor), Daystar Press 1973
- Christian Youth Work, Ibadan, Daystar Press 1979
- And Women, Where Do They Come In? , Methodist Literature Department, Lagos, 1980.
- The state of Christian theology in Nigeria 1980 / 81, (Editor) Daystar Press, Ibadan 1986.
- Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa, Orbis Books, New York 1996 (translated into German).
- Who will roll the stone Away? , The Ecumenical Decade of the churches in Solidarity with Women, Risk Series, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1991.
- The Wesleyan Presence in Nigeria, An exploration of power, Control and Partnership in Mission 1992 Sefer Ibadan
- Leadership Development in the Methodist Church Nigeria (1842 –1962) Sefer, Ibadan, 1992
- Daughters of Anowa: Women and Patriarchy. Orbis Book Maryknoll 1995
- Introducing African Women's Theology, Sheffield Academic Press 2001
- Beads and Strands. Reflections of an African woman on Christianity in Africa

5. ODUYOYE'S RETIREMENT PROJECTS

By 2007, Mercy Oduyoye's project that she was undertaking was the one she initiated in the hope that the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana, may have a vibrant trajectory that keeps in touch with people outside its walls. It is an Institute of Women in Religion and Culture. In this programme, they offer educational events; workshops, seminars and conferences on local issues raised by women. They facilitate the gathering of input, analyses and deliberations on the way forward. Concurrently she has been raising funds to build a conference facility at Trinity Theological Seminary to facilitate the holding of these events even during the term time so as to intensify the participation of students of the seminary, university of Ghana and other tertiary institutions in their vicinity. That is, serving and encouraging people to care about gender justice and human rights as a whole.

6. AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY SINCE 1989 -

African women's theology (AWT) was born in 1989, in Accra-Ghana, when Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye gave the keynote address that inaugurated the Circle of Concerned African Women's Theologians (Phiri 1997: 68). In view of this, it is one of the youngest contemporary theologies in the Africa of the 21st century. Others are, Black Theology of South Africa (BT), African Theology (AT); and African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR). For while African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR) was born in 1990, African Women's Theology was born in 1989.

In the Accra Conference of 1989, where Oduyoye delivered her inaugural address, she urged African Christianity to do a "two-winged" theology through which both women and men could communicate with God, Seventy African women theologians attended it (Njoroge 1997: 77). In emphasising that a bird cannot fly by one wing, she was attempting a reconstruction of the traditional approach to theologising in Africa where one gender did theology almost to the exclusion of the other. By her two-winged theology, Mercy Oduyoye like the so-called Reconstructionist African Theologians, such as Jesse Mugambi, and Charles Villa-Vicencio among others, was urging for inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity, unity as opposed to division and respect in gender relations. Thus, even though she was not conscious of it, she was primarily working under reconstructive motif.

Before the inauguration of AWT, Mercy Oduyoye has been the leading African woman pursuing feminist theologies that are distinctly African, without using the phrase African Women's Theology(ies). As noted earlier, her being the founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians (otherwise called The Circle), which midwifed the birth of AWT in 1989, has indeed been a great contribution to African Christianity since then. After co-ordinating the Circle from 1989 to 1996, Musimbi Kanyoro, from Kenya, took over from her, and continued up to 2002. During the gathering of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 4-8, 2002, Isabel Apawo Phiri, from Malawi was appointed General Coordinator for a period of five years. In this Conference whose theme was "Sex, Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices," Hélène Yinda of Cameroon, Dr. Dorcas Akintunde of Nigeria and Rev. Felicidade Cherinda of Mozambique were appointed Linguistic Research Coordinators for the Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone regions respectively developed a new Structure and Plan of Action (see <http://www.thecirclecawt.org/>). During the Cameroon Circle conference of 2007, Lusungu Fulata Moyo of Malawi took over as the co-ordinator of The Circle. Besides Oduyoye there are other Circle leaders such as Bette Ekeya, Mary Getui, Teresa Hinga, Musimbi Kanyoro, Hannah Kinoti, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, and Nyambura Njoroge of Kenya, Teresa Okure of Nigeria, Elisabeth Amoah of Ghana, Rose Zoe, Louise Tappa and Grace Eneme in Cameroon, Bernadette Mbuy Beya and Justine Kahungu in Zaire, and Brigalia Bam and Denise Ackerman in South Africa, Musa W. Dube of Botswana among others (see website on The Circle www.thecirclecawt.org). Since 1989, they have participated in oral theologies, through song, music, story telling, Bible reading and in particular, through written theologies that are evident in many emerging publications in recent times.

Apart from Oduyoye, other founders of the Circle (of Concerned African women theologians) include Betty Ekeya, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Musimbi Kanyoro, Rosemary Edet, and Rachel

Tetteh among others (Kanyoro 1996: 9). After launching the Circle, which is Pan-African, it gave birth to other circles that came later. For example in 1993/4 - English-speaking West Africans met in Abokobi near Accra under the facilitation of the late Rachel Tetteh and Elizabeth Amoah. Around the same time, 1993/4, French-speaking West Africa met in Douala, Cameroon, in 1993 and was co-ordinated by Louise Tappa and Rose Obianga (Kanyoro 1996: 10). By 2007, it had about 15 chapters in 13 countries and small working groups in several other countries; it had Chapters Diaspora in Europe and North America. It also had Solidarity Chapters at Yale University, USA. With regard to publications, it had 31 books by group authorship and several single authorship books. Additionally it had established a center for women, religion and culture in Accra and a women's resource center in Limuru, Kenya (for details, see website on The Circle www.thecirclecawt.org).

Another postcolonial theology in Africa, which is comparable to African Women's Theology, is: African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR). While AWT was born in 1989, ATOR was born in early 1990 when the then President of the All Africa Conference of Churches (*Hereafter* AACC), Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the then General Secretary, the Rev. Dr. Jose B. Chipenda, invited Jesse Mugambi, the "undisputed founder," to make a theological reflection on the changing global patterns following the end of cold war, in 1989, and its relevance to Africa. And on 30th March 1990, Jesse Mugambi, who was, by then, a researcher with the AACC presented his (inaugural) paper on the "Future of the Church and the Church of the Future in Africa," to the General Committee of the organisation - in the Nairobi Meeting. In the Nairobi Meeting (of 30th March 1990), Jesse Mugambi suggested that African theological articulation must shift her theological emphasis, in the postcolonial Africa, from the Exodus motif to reconstructive motif. He suggested that reconstruction is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s and beyond. He further contended that in the New World Order, the figure of Nehemiah, unlike that of Moses, gives us the mirror through which we are enabled to spot out our mission to remake Africa out of sorts of ruins that continue to bedevil Africa (Mugambi 1995: 160 – 180).

❖ African Women Theology or African Women Theologies?

Isabel Apawo Phiri explains why it is African Women's "theologies" and not just African Women's "theology." She says: "African women theologians want to acknowledge that even within Africa, there is diversity of women's experiences due to [the] differences in race, culture, politics, economy and religion" (Phiri 2004a: 16)." She goes on to explain that despite the differences in terminology, "all women would like to see the end of sexism and the establishment of a more just society of men and women who seek the well-being of the other" (Phiri 2004a: 16)."

From the above, we can deduce that African Women's Theologies like other theologies such as the United States of America's *Theologia Mujerista* of the Spanish-speaking women, the Womanist Theology of the African-American women and the white American woman, among others, is a liberation theology - that seeks to liberate women from socio-cultural forces that tend to dehumanise and to oppress them - hence barring them from being fulfilled as true images of God (*Imago Dei*) (Phiri 1997: 68).

As Phiri observes, studies in the Majority-world feminists' theology have wrongly combined African-American Womanist theology with African Women's theology; but while African Women's theology and African-American Women theologies may share the same skin colour, the contexts within which they do their theology are very different (Phiri 1997: 68). An example can be seen in the fact that the context of Womanist theology is the history of oppression from slavery and sexism in the Americas; which is not the actual case in the culturally oppressive Africa.

African Women's theology, like other theologies of liberation in Africa (refer to Black theology of South Africa and African theology), covers a wide scope. For it covers the wider concerns of the society such as the history of slavery and colonisation, cultural and spiritual imperialism, struggle in the shape of racism, female circumcision, cultural identity, poverty engendered by globalisation, neo-colonial structures, widowhood, childlessness, inheritance, the tragedy of HIV and AIDS among other issues (Phiri 1997: 68). Its sources include: oral sources, The Circle of Concerned African Women theologians, Anthologies of papers from Conferences and Consultations of the circle, Bible study sessions, informal interviews, personal letters that have been kept anonymous, unpublished thesis and research papers among others (Phiri 1997: 68).

According to Phiri, African women's theologies are:

A critical, academic study of the causes of women oppression: particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy. They are committed to the eradication of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions both in African culture and Christianity. African women's theologies take women's experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexism (Phiri 2004b: 156).

According to Musa Dube, The Circle is the space for women from Africa to do communal theology. She goes on to assert that "... a circle of women describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnectedness of life" (www.thecirclecawt.org).

In my own assessment, African Women's Theologies emerged out of the need to create a forum in seeking to liberate African women from the oppressive structures in both the society and the religious institutions, and especially the Church. Commenting on this, Phiri says:

The construction of womanhood by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in African Church and society are imaged. Patriarchy has defined women as inferior to men thereby perpetuating the oppression of women by religion and culture (Phiri 1997: 11).

The conditions and status of African women have been something that men do not want to discuss, but as for women theologians it is something that ought to be discussed as the urgency of the moment. Musimbi Kanyoro observes the conditions of African women by saying that:

African women are custodian 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. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as "cultural values" and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed. In the guise of culture, harmful practices and traditions are perpetuated. Practices such as female

genital mutilation, early betrothals and marriages, and stigmatization of single women and widows, [polygamy, domestic violence] hinder the liberation of women (Kanyoro 2001: 159).

Oduyoye argues that, for years women have been carrying the knowledge that men were oppressing them, but the conditions were not suitable for them to raise their voices. She says, “Over time, African women had to learn to know their oppressors but had held their peace, because “when your hand is in someone’s mouth, you do not hit that person on the head” (Oduyoye 1995: 3).

Some Methodological Considerations

Kanyoro suggests that in order for African Women’s liberation theology to achieve its goal, cultural hermeneutics should be regarded as very important and first step towards that goal. This is because “all questions regarding the welfare and status of women in Africa are explained within the framework of culture.” And in her insightful work, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics an African Perspective* (2002), she suggests how hermeneutics should be done. In summary she suggests that the Church should be open to change and at the same time it should maintain the tension that exists between gospel and culture. According to her, this tension will automatically invite dialogue between Christianity and African religious cultures. She says that cultural hermeneutics can also be used as a method of dialogue between Christianity and African Religions. When dealing with the aspects of gospel and culture, she feels that, three questions should be applied. First, how is difference a problem to gospel and culture? Second, what option might we consider when dealing with differences? Third, how do we theologize once we recognize the difference? For her, difference is not a problem but a reality that can be good and creative. She avers: “What is required of cultural hermeneutics is to sift the good aspects of the culture and religion and affirm them, knowing that there is room to reject what is bad” (Kanyoro 2002: 65 – 71).

Isabel Phiri acknowledges that African Women’s Theology sees the need to include the voices of women, both theologians and non-theologians, because it recognises that most women in Africa are engaging in oral theologies. She says:

Story telling is one of the powerful methodologies that African women have revived. Musa Dube has developed a unique methodology of reading a biblical story in the context of globalisation through story telling technique. Through story telling, African women are bringing to the attention of the world their spiritual, emotional and physical suffering and the potential they have to transform their situation of oppression. It includes men in its vision and struggle for African liberation from all forms of oppression (Phiri 2004b: 156).

Story telling as a methodology in doing African Women’s theologies is an essential approach for doing any reconstructive theology in the post cold war Africa. Indeed, it is a tool of healing and reconciliation. In a continent that is recovering from foreign and locally instigated conflicts, story telling as an avenue of confessing our sins of commission and omission will be crucial. The post war countries of Angola, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique are just but a few examples that can be cited to demonstrate the importance of story-telling in a continent that is in dire need of psychosocial reconstruction. James Cone captures this view when he says:

Every people have a story to tell, something to say to themselves, their children, and to the world about how they think and live, as they determine their reason for being... When people can no longer listen to the other people’s stories, they become enclosed within their

own social context... And then they feel they must destroy other people's stories (Cone 1975: 102-3).

HIV and AIDS as a Fundamental Concern

Of great concern in African Women's theologies is the HIV and AIDS crisis. They have gallantly pushed this agenda since 2002. In view of this, Isabel Phiri rightly develops the view that HIV and AIDS is an urgent issue for theology of mission in Africa. She rejects some *conventional wisdom* that "HIV and AIDS is a punishment from God" and explains that such retrogressive views would make it difficult for the church to successfully confront the pandemic (Phiri 2004c: 423 – 4). Rather, it should be confronted as a challenge that affects all people in tropical Africa with its catastrophic consequences that needs to be addressed with urgency. With marriage in tropical Africa being at great risk, she contends that HIV and AIDS ought to be treated as a gender issue (Phiri 2004c: 425). This, she argues, will guarantee the safety of the African society considering that "marriage is at the centre of the African community" (Phiri 2004c: 425).

The Future of African Women's Theology

With regard to the future of African women's theologies, Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro optimistically predicts the transformation of the African society towards an inclusive society of men and women. Consequently, she sees the way forward as something to do with dialoguing amongst women (whose voices were previously unheard) with their male counterparts (Kanyoro 2006: 37). She cites the case of the "dialogue" between Jesse Mugambi and Musa Dube as a case in point. In this dialogue, "Jesse Mugambi Is Calling Us to Move from Liberation to Reconstruction: A Postcolonial Feminist Response," Unpublished paper, 2001, Dube critiqued Mugambi's theology of reconstruction as that which needed to address the superstructure of patriarchy keenly (Kanyoro 2006: 37).

By 2008, African women theologians who were responsible for theological formation and religious training, included, Mercy Oduyoye, Denise Ackermann, Isabel Phiri, Elizabeth Amoah, Nyambura Njoroge, Musimbi Kanyoro, Teresa Hinga, and Musa Dube among others (Landman 1992: 38). Some of these women teach and work in the Diaspora, and yet this does not hinder them from influencing theological formation in Africa through their publications. Such would be Nyambura Njoroge, who works for the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

In concluding, this section, we appreciate that though African Women's Theology is unique in its own right, some of her concerns are also the concerns of other African theologies in the post cold war Africa (1989 -), a continent which is grappling with the renewal calls of rebirth, renaissance, rejuvenation, development, rebuilding, democracy, deconstruction and reconstruction. This drives us to wonder: isn't it appropriate for all African theologies, African Women's Theology inclusive, to openly acknowledge that reconstructive motif is the common denominator for all theologies in Africa in the twenty-first century?

This now drives us to systematically assess some of the key concerns, to which we now turn.

6.1 African Women's Christology

The word Christology is derived from two words, 'Christ' and 'logy'- (study of) - which comes from the Greek word 'Logos' meaning word or reason. It literary means the study about Christ or

reasoning about Christ. Oduyoye (2001: 52) defines it simply as “a reasoned account of what the word Christ stands for.” In other words, we are attempting the question that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Luke 9: 18-21).

In Oduyoye’s view, Christology for African women is the story of Jesus who saves, the one who brings and lives good news. She further asserts that we cannot ignore the African Religion in seeking to articulate Christology (Oduyoye 2001: 59). Similarly, Terese Souga, quoted in Mercy Oduyoye (2001: 58), says that Christology cannot be formulated without taking into account women and their place in church and society. To this end, I agree with Oduyoye when she says that Christology is not meant to analyse the nature of Christ (2001: 63), but to identify his saving acts and to cling in hope of liberation; and that it is to celebrate the victories over domination and death and to attribute these to Jesus rather than other powers. On the whole, African Women’s Christology’s concerns include: Patriarchalisation of Christology, Clericalism as propounded by the sexist members of our society, and the need to focus on the motherly attributes of Christ.

6.2 African Women’s Understanding of God

In general African women, in “African Women’s Theology,” are trying to argue liberatively and reconstructively for a case where God – the one we worship is seen and understood as “neither man or woman” (Abbey 2001: 148). In other words, God has no gender. In so doing, they are tracing various backgrounds that might have led to patriarchal dominance in understanding God and seeking a way forward.

Rosemary Ruether (1983: 67) contends that since God is male and female and neither male nor female, one needs inclusive language for God that draws on the images and experiences of both genders. For her, this inclusiveness can happen only by naming God/ess in female as well as male metaphors. Her views are in line with Oduyoye (2001: 42) who feels that most of Africa has no images of God, so where there are no gender-specific pronouns it has been insisted that God is supra-gender.

As Abbey (2001: 145) notes, *Ataa Naa Nyonmo* (which means Father-Mother God), the Ga name for God, is perhaps the most significant as far as a balanced and holistic concept of God is concerned. For it speaks of God neither exclusively as father nor as mother, but it takes the whole of humanity into account. In any case, when we look at the images of the Goddess in her various forms in ancient texts (2800-1200BC), we discover a world whose dialectics do not fall into dualisms. Specifically, the concept of gender complementarity is absent from the ancient myths (Ruether 1983: 53). For the Goddess and God are equivalent, not complementary images of the divine.

In attempting to answer why the motherhood of God has not influenced Ghanaian Christian theology as in the case of the Ga people, Abbey attributes this to the problem of Christian mission and colonialism (Abbey 2001: 146). She rightly contends that the motherhood of God could not influence African Christianity because the missionaries to Africa in the 19th century did not take seriously the cultures of Africa. For to them, it was inconceivable that Africa would have anything to contribute to the enrichment of Christianity. All African ideas were thought to be so irreligious and superstitious that for Christianity to flourish, these ideas had to be put to rest.

6.3 African Women's Ecclesiology

What is Ecclesiology? The word ecclesiology is derived from two Greek words, *ecclesia* and *logos*. *Ecclesia* means the Church while *logos* mean word or reason. It literally means the study about the Church or reasoning about the Church. To this end, Rosemary Ruether's definition of the Church as the place "where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of mutuality is gathered together and nurtured, and where the community is spreading this vision and struggle to others" (Ruether 1983: 213).

❖ Exclusion from decision-making

Women who are the majority in the Church, and form the backbone of the Church are usually excluded from decision-making (Potgieter 1996: 17). As Isabel Phiri notes, they have been "conditioned to look up to men only for leadership" (Phiri 1996: 67). This results in women being treated as junior "partners rather than as daughters of God's house" (Oduyoye 2001: 84). Thus, women are under-represented in all the decision-making bodies of our Churches in African society today, at all levels and even their condition of service needs further review (Phiri 1996: 71).

❖ Clericalism

Clericalism, by definition, disempowers the people and turns them into "laity" dependant on the clergy (Ruether 1983: 206-7). It assumes that people have no direct access to God; only the clergy can mediate or intercede for others. It is for the clergy to authorize theological training, to preach, to teach, to administer and to administer the sacraments (Potgieter 1996: 18). This clericalism is built upon patriarchy as evidenced by the fact that it continues to exclude women even in lay leadership roles.

❖ Violence Against Women

As Mercy Oduyoye (2001: 88) says, the image of the Church as a caring community is tarnished "by its tardiness" in confronting violence against women. Now, violence takes many forms. That is, psychological violence, threatening of women ministers (Njoroge 1996: 9), sacking those who dissent, writing warning letters (Phiri 1996: 63 – 105), Sexual violence, physical violence, marginalization, and demeaning, among others. All these are common in the African Church. Nyambura Njoroge contends that the training that the Church offers does not prepare one to minister to prostitutes, the victims of domestic violence, and the victims of sexual harassment in the work place, "nor to the wealthy, with their deep spiritual needs" (Njoroge 1996: 5).

❖ Ordination

As Phiri (1998: 199-200) says, external influences have negatively affected the African Church with regard to ordination of women. For example, in the Anglican Church of Malawi, Rev. R.S. Hunter argued against the ordination of women on the basis of maintaining what was the tradition of the very first Anglican Missions. His views were in total disregard of the context, which is the Chewa Anglican Christians of Malawi. The argument further failed to put into consideration the present needs of the contemporary situation, which amounts to a serious challenge to Christianity in Africa of the 21st century.

❖ *Symbols*

Sharon Potgieter contends that like others feminists, she is no longer comfortable in the Church for its symbols have become meaningless (Potgieter 1996: 20). Ruether feels that these patriarchal symbols and the hierarchical relationship of the ministry to the laity are still taken as normative (Ruether 1983: 200). Women are however allowed, in a small way, to integrate themselves into this male-defined and dominated role and they adopt the same titles such as Reverend, the Bishop, the Moderator, the Archbishop, the Very Reverend, Rt. Rev. Canon etc without questioning the suitability of these titles. They too stand in the pulpit when given a chance without, sometimes, questioning the symbolism of the pulpit in an African setting. In areas where some are ordained – they too wear the Clerical Collar, and the Clerical Gowns – without questioning their symbolism.

6.4 African Women's Anthropology

African women's Anthropology highlights the patriarchal nature of women's survival in Africa. In particular, it highlightens the patriarchal structures that have been created by one gender from time immemorial to institutionalise the alleged inferiority of women before men. For example, there are a lot of stereotypical generalisations that have been passed over from one generation to the other. They include: "To be born a female child is inferior status", "women are Eve incarnate" (cf. Genesis 3), "a girl is little piece of property", "women are entitled to men", "men and women are not equal", "God ordained the inferiority of women", "no women no cry", "sin in the world is a result of women", "women are fragile", "women cannot make good leaders", "women are dangerous when they are given instruments of power", among others.

African women's anthropology as a study of full humanity of women also addresses some of the issues that adversely affect women more negatively than their male counterparts. They include polygamy, marriage, divorce, domestic violence, childlessness/barrenness, widowhood, prostitution, and division of labour, among other issues. It also seeks to highlight the strategies for women in addressing some of these issues.

In particular, Rosemary Ruether (Ruether 1983: 94) traces background of patriarchal Christianity that came to dominate the Christian Church in classical orthodoxy and argues that it never went so far as to completely deny women's participation in the image of God. However, she contends that churchmen came to regard women as bearers of sin. Interestingly, patriarchal theology regarded women to be more apt to sin and as lesser spiritually. As an inferior being, it was held that a woman couldn't represent the image of God fully as man can. Further, man was to regard a woman as representing part of himself that must be "repressed and kept under control by reason to prevent a fall into sin and disorder" (Ruether 1983: 94). In other words, the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 led to the wrong conclusion that women have inferior nature and they should continue under punishment for that 'original sin.' It appears that the coming of Christ, his death and resurrection did not undo the quagmire that feminism found itself in (following the fall in Genesis 3). As Ruether (1983: 95) further says, this pattern of patriarchal anthropology can be illustrated in the entire line of classical Christian theology from ancient to modern times.

In this regard, the example of St. Augustine best illustrates this: As the classical source of patriarchal anthropology, he held that even though a woman can attain salvation, she still remains, inferior. She is sin-prone; she is only secondarily in the image of God while the male normatively possesses the image of God. Similarly, The 16th century Reformation strengthened

the views of the classical orthodox with regard to women in the Church and the society in general. In particular, Martin Luther held that in the original creation, Eve was equal to Adam but after the fall in Genesis 3, things changed. She is now subject to man as her superior; as a punishment for her sin; an expression of divine justice (Ruether 1983: 97).

Even within the African continent, African Women theologians have been conscientising the society that being born a girl has been seen as inferior status. For example, among the Ibo of Nigeria, a girl was little more than a piece of property (Oduyoye 2001: 68). This stereotype has been institutionalised in Africa for years. It is no wonder that there are reported cases where women have had a fatal resignation to the status that are prescribed by men in their respective societies.

Esther Acolatse's definition of sin as "the refusal of the self to be the self it was meant to be" is worth being considered as a fitting description that will be used as a working definition in this section (Acolatse 2001: 125). This is evident in our Christian society in various ways. For example, the refusal to accept the *Imago Dei* in everyone is a case in point. In the Church, the refusal to ordain women after years and years is a clear point of sin. Another case is women's withdrawal "to avoid problems" when patriarchy asserts itself is another case in point. Cases have been seen where women surrender to patriarchy whenever a small threat is issued. One will hear some say "after all we are women." The failure of the society to raise to the occasion and address teething problems eating away the society such as HIV and AIDS, polygamy, prostitution, widowhood, domestic violence, and stereotypes that have underpinned women, among other issues is tantamount to the self's refusal to be the self it was meant to be.

Thus Acolatse is right in saying that "if sin constitutes missing the mark of our true humanity, and we are serious about corrective measures to bring us to full humanity, then we are better for naming it and finding healing for it" (Acolatse 2001: 138). This is the call for entire Africa; a challenge to break the silence on gender disparities. We must tackle the sin of inability to appropriate our God given freedom, as it is the case in modern day Africa with regard to gender issues.

6.5 African Women's Hospitality

- *Hospitality as inherent in being African.*

African women's theology stresses that hospitality is inherent in being African. As Oduyoye (2001: 94) says of herself, and consequently speaks for us all, "God never forgets a deed of hospitality. That is my faith as an African." This is evidenced by the refugee crisis in Africa; for homes are still open to them despite the risks involved. Various sayings such as, "Better to lose your money than to lose your human relations," "doing as the ancestors handed down to Africans" etc. strengthen the inherent nature of being hospitable in Africa. As an inherent practise, hospitality was a moral law in ancient Africa and the modern African Christian thinking. It is not only seen to be at the core of African Traditional Spirituality but more importantly in the African Christian Spirituality. Thus hospitality is a way of life, in Africa, from family or among friends. In the family level, even children without parents are taken care of by others. That means that the concept of hospitality will continue to inform our eschatology in Africa. For as we look upon the "last day," our acts of hospitality will have to continue as part of the "journey."

- *Mary as 'Theotokos'*

African women theologians' stresses that women are linked in a special way to hospitality in that Mary the mother of Jesus hosted God. Hence she is *Theotokos* meaning the mother of God (see Oduyoye 2001: 94). This indicates that the concept of hospitality is very dear to women given the high honour of hosting God through Mary. African women have therefore placed much emphasis on the subject of hospitality since they see it as the mark of divinity and therefore, something to which human beings should aspire. That's why in their writings, observes, Oduyoye, they tell of experiences of hospitality that make them feel less than human (Oduyoye 2001: 74). For example, treating women or girls as merchandise, gifts and means of cementing relationships between men, feels less than human. In the African Traditional Society, chiefs will give girls to other chiefs to cement good neighbourliness; something, which African women theologians rightly feel, is misplaced hospitality that goes contrary to the inspiration given by Mary. When men in Africa (will) stop getting their daughters from school and forcing them to marry their creditors or friends as a gesture of misplaced hospitality, then the inspiration that Mary gives to humanity will turn to a reality in our respective situations.

- *Hospitality as the way of life.*

African women's theology asserts that the way to the present and the future is hospitality. They look at eschatology with regard to the continuity and strengthening of hospitality, working out areas that tend to pervert the cause of justice to everyone. In particular, Nyambura Njoroge identifies generosity, mutuality, reciprocity and caring as the central principle of community building in Africa (see Oduyoye 2001: 105).

Oduyoye cites the case of Jesus of Nazareth whose ministry was highly boosted by the hospitality from those who shared his vision. Hospitality goes hand in hand with sacrifice as a way of life. Sacrifice is associated with the cross and suffering for African women's theology. It is for that reason that Njoroge points that, "a caring and compassionate Jesus travelled the path towards Golgotha not to perpetuate crucifixion, but to bring them to an end" (Njoroge 1996: 9). Thus hospitality is the way of life through which we can be able to relate with the doctrine of the last days (eschatology).

- *Spirituality of hope.*

The resurrection of the body is used as the image for dealing with African women's spirituality of hope, for as they argue, 'it was women who were determined to do honour to the body.' It was women, who were entrusted with the message of hope that said death does not have the last word (Oduyoye 2001: 110). Resurrection strengthens them as they focus on the eschaton, which is informed by the present time (in regard to our relation with our neighbours). This victory over death is an assurance that led God's unerring spirit and that they "shall not stray in the desert nor miss their providential way" (Oduyoye 2001: 121). African women's spirituality should therefore be seen as a way of uncovering and advocating women's true humanity – humanity with hospitality.

- *Eschatology*

For African women's theologians and to a large extent, for many Africans, eschatology focuses on the fullness and fruitfulness of life here, in this land of the living. That means, our present hospitality is very important in our African eschatology for we do not focus on the last things

without due regard to our present time. This also means, it is in line with Christ's teaching in the Lord's Prayer for us to seek the kingdom of God to come here on earth as it is done in heaven (Matthew 6:1ff).

Ruether (1983: 242) traces the background of eschatological thought in ancient near eastern culture and explains that they saw the cycles of renewal of nature as the key to the constant hope for renewed life, resurrected from drought and death. The ancient Gods and Goddesses were not outside but within this struggle for life against death. Their eschatology, like in the African case, was informed by the present situation. That is, they expressed their hope for renewed rains and fertility of the land, bountiful crops, and healthy offspring for human and animal and more importantly for peace, social order, justice, security against outside enemies, and good rulers who would protect the poor and liberate the captive. This further agrees with the concept of African hospitality and African eschatological thinking as the previous discussion has shown.

- *Childlessness*

It is logical to concur with Oduyoye's (1996: 107) view that African women's creative literature is replete with what has come to be named the "child factor." Perhaps we should add a voice and say that African society in general is replete with child factor. That makes a childless couple to be pitied or even sympathised with, as was the case with Oduyoye. Her views on the plight of a childless woman who is sometimes ridiculed, abused, and mocked is a clear case of inhospitality as opposed to hospitality. To this end, it is imperative to concur with Oduyoye's assertion that children are gifts from God; and therefore when God fails to give children to some women they should not be discriminated against. Indeed, they are part of God's hospitality; and as we know it in Africa, hospitality is never demanded otherwise demanding hospitality may amount to corruption.

- *Abuse of African hospitality*

The sincerity of African hospitality has from time to time been abused. It has been exploited right from the time of slavery and slave trade, colonialism and even by neo-colonialism. A story is told of the great South African settler from Britain - Cecil Rhodes - in the 19th century. It is said that he was dying of cancer while he was in Europe. Modern medication by then had been tried on him with no or very little success. It turned out that in the end, adverse weather conditions in Europe were worsening his condition. It was suggested that he should be taken to Africa due to its warm habitable climate. On arrival in South Africa, the local people received him as usual with warm hospitality.

In addition, they gave him their traditional medicine and he healed quickly. When he tried to give tokens to the African healers, they refused arguing that their services were not for sale. As he grew stronger, he started grabbing huge chunks of land as the Africans helplessly watched. This was a clear abuse of this inherent hospitality. Rhodes was not the only European who enjoyed African hospitality. Henry Stanley, Samuel Baker, and many others are notable examples. Unfortunately, those who were explorers went back to Europe to report negatively on this hospitality. False information was passed on to the people in Europe that almost made the rest of the world to equate Africans with beasts (see Gathogo 2001: 36).

A Critique of African Women's Theology/Theologians

African women's theology, as a reconstructive theology of the post colonial Africa will find its litmus test if it projects itself as exclusively a 'women's theology.' In an era of inclusivity, it will pay dividends if men and women will get concerned with the plight of African women who have borne the pains of living in a patriarchal society from time immemorial. Certainly, the struggle to deconstruct patriarchy is an "every person business." Indeed, injustice somewhere is injustice everywhere.

My position on this is driven partly by the African customs of wholeness where one person's injury is an injury for all. And as the African saying goes, "*Ngari ihitagwo ni mundu na muthoniwe.*" That is, a charging leopard is collectively chased out of the village by a person and his or her in-laws, whom Africans do not easily intermingle with. In this case, a leopard in the name of indifference to gender concerns must now be deconstructed so that we can collectively reconstruct our respective societies.

Second, there are some people in our modern day Africa who see gender activism as bothersome. Why? Probably because it has been associated with one gender "making unnecessary drama" in social forums. If it is a worthwhile concern, why not involve everyone just as past injustices such as slavery and slave trade, colonialism, Civil Rights and apartheid were confronted and finally dismantled by all genders? Musa Dube appears to identify this concern when she narrates how she has encountered this misunderstanding. She says,

In the workshops some heads of departments have openly said, "stop this gender nonsense." In some evaluations some people wrote this was an excellent workshop, but you almost spoiled it with your gender nonsense." This resistance from theological leaders and educators means that our students who become religious/faith leaders graduate with no understanding of what gender inequalities are; how they work with the cultural, social, economic, political and spiritual institutions of our worlds to promote the spread of HIV/AIDS (see www.thecirclecawt.org).

Clearly, African Women's Theologies are theologies for all genders as their concerns are geared towards building a fair and just society. Men, women and children cannot be excluded in it. In any case, African women's theologies are too important to be left to one gender alone.

7. CONCLUSION

In their book, *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006) edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojina Nadar, African Women Theologians have spent their energies well by "revealing" Mercy Oduyoye, as an icon of our times. In particular, Letty M. Russell in her article, "Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Wise Woman Bearing Gifts" (2006:58) is explicit that "Mercy is our Mother." This is however meant to portray her role in African Women's Theology, but a close look at her entire works as a scholar and an ecumenist shows that she is a "Mother of All." As one of the few "African Mothers" she is a symbol of hope that Africa too has its "good sources." Indeed, her international marriage to Modupe Oduyoye while she is from the Akan of Ghana clearly communicates the message that Africa is one. Like Kwame Nkrumah who thought and acted African, Mercy Oduyoye equally does the same – a pan-Africanist of our times whose spirit will continue telling Africa to address her own disparities, so that, together, we may experience the foretaste of the kingdom of God

On the whole, African women's theology, as has been propounded since 1989, is philosophically reconstructive in motif. As with the African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR), its fundamental concerns include: deconstruction of patriarchy, liberation from all neo-colonial forces, and reconstruction of our broken society in terms of its anthropology, gender imbalances, poverty concern, Concern for HIV and AIDS, violence and domestic violence, Concern for the environment and concern for a just society among others. This shows that there is need for greater dialogue between the two post cold war African theologies.

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