

INTRODUCTIONS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

# Introducing African Women's Theology

*Mercy Amba Oduyoye*



# **Introductions in Feminist Theology**

## **6**

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Mary Grey  
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Catherine Norris  
Janet Wootton

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## Editors' Preface

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Introducing Feminist Theology is a BISFT (Britain and Ireland School of Feminist Theology) series committed to the global family of feminist theologies, as part of the universal struggle of women for justice and the recognition of full humanity. It is the hope that this book, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, the sixth in the series, will play a significant part in this process. It was a great joy when Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye accepted the invitation to write it. Well-known in the Ecumenical Movement globally as well as for the way she opened up the Women's Desk in the World Council in Geneva and launched the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, she has for many of us been the voice who brought the anguish of Africa to the Christian theological scene and refused to allow us to ignore the steadily worsening situation as Africa sank increasingly into poverty, debt, and the tragedy of AIDS.

This book is not only the vision of one woman theologian, inspiring though that may be. Although it does not claim to represent all the theologizing of African women from the 54 countries of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), it is very much an attempt to give voice to the growing community of African women theologians. Specifically, the book arises from the author's experiences between 1976 and 1996 when she made a sustained effort to discover and cultivate African women doing theology. This involved the creation of The Circle of Concerned African Women—and it is the lectures and papers from the Circle meetings which form a unique and precious resource for this book.

Professor Oduyoye poignantly depicts the context of African women doing theology: colonization and slavery form not only the background but the continuing struggle in the shape of racism, the increasing poverty engendered by globalization and neo-colonial economic structures. She shows how African women bring unique gifts to theology: the powerful tradition of story-telling means that theirs is narrative theology,



drawing on oral traditions, myth, folk tale and of course the creativity of African women novelists.

*Introducing African Women's Theology* is not ivory tower theology, nor is it a book only for women. What Mercy Oduyoye conveys is African women's commitment to sustain life itself, a struggle born of the daily efforts of caring and nurture for the whole community. The significant contribution that it makes is the challenge to theology, liberation and the transformation of oppressive structures. In order to do this the book engages in a double hermeneutic: biblical hermeneutics is in dialogue with cultural hermeneutics. The reader is left in no doubt that the one is not possible without the other: a deep love of the liberating message of the Bible enables African women to draw out the transforming message to eradicate the injustice of a culture that still refuses full dignity to women. This method stimulates reflection on Christology, anthropology and ecclesiology. We are inspired by a vision of hospitality that extends to the hospitality of the earth herself.

The generosity of the author, her love for her people and country, and her vision of theology make this book unique. My hope is that the voices she has enabled through her book will never again be silenced, and that the longed-for transformation will be realized in her lifetime.

Mary Grey  
(on behalf of the editorial committee)

# Chapter One

## Presenting the Study

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### Statement of Purpose

The particular theologies of African women express aspects of global and African Christian theologies from the vantage point of women's experiences and locations. They are the theologies that reflect women's heritage of participation in Africa's colonial and missionary history. They reflect the antecedent religion and culture which continue as Africa's religio-culture. This component of the context of Christian theology in Africa is one that plays a key role in women's theologies. The mercantile and colonial encounters with Arabs, Europeans and peoples of European descent, continue in Africa in terms of economic disadvantage flowing out of a history of enslavement and economic exploitation. The roots of poverty, racism and militarism are nourished by this history. Encounters with the propagators of Christianity and Islam have had a deep and pervading influence on the evolution of spirituality, religion and culture in Africa and continue to do so.

Given the geographical extent of Africa, and the diversity of Africa's peoples and historical experiences, there is a need to define the limits of the use of 'African' and 'African women'. The meaning of Africa, for the purpose of this study, is limited to countries from which have come the women's theological writings utilized in this study. No attempt is made to cover all of the 54 or so nations that belong to the Organization of African Unity (OAU).<sup>1</sup> This is done because the purpose of this book is to review the written sources of African Women's Christian theology

1. The countries of origin of the African women theologians whose words and/or ideas appear in this publication are: Angola, Republic of Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire), Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malagasy Republic, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Republic of South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

emanating from a particular source, namely, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle).<sup>2</sup> Other religious perspectives and oral expressions are present only when necessary for comparative, collaborative or contrasting purposes, as their stance impinges on the community of understanding.

The word 'women' is limited to those who count themselves African and who believe that women have a desire and a responsibility to do their own thinking and to speak their own words about God as about all other religious and cultural concerns. The theology covers the writings of women who do not accept that African men's theology should suffice for the entire faith community. What we attempt to study here is African Christian Theology in the women-centered key.<sup>3</sup> There are expressions of faith from women alumnae of a variety of theological institutions as well as from other disciplines. Several are ordained into the Eucharistic ministry while others are lay theologians. All are keen churchwomen, and many have intensive liberative praxis and advocacy roles for the concerns that stimulate their theology. All together these are women whose theologizing go beyond the written word to liberative and transformative action. *Women* in this study refers to African women unless otherwise qualified.

### Methodology

The narrative is mostly in the third person although I generally include myself in what I accept as efforts at offering liberating perspectives. I am therefore writing as a participant observer in this ongoing creative process. The first observation is that African women accept story as a source of theology and so tell their own stories as well as study the experiences of other women including those outside their own continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten. In this regard, the creative writings of African women have furnished a rich source of women's views on life as lived in Africa, thus providing the theologians with other perspectives on the context in which they theologize as well

2 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was inaugurated in 1989 to facilitate research, writing and publication by a pan-African multireligious and multiracial network of women with a concern of the impact of religion and culture on African women.

3. Theology is necessarily God-centered. Women-centered is to be understood as what highlights women as actors, agents and thinkers.

as how women from other disciplines interpret contemporary Africa. This framework is necessary, given the fact that narrative theology prevails in both oral and written materials. The normative role of stories in Africa's oral corpus, and the role of story in biblical theology, give women the paradigm for their theological reflection. Story was a traditional source of theology, which seems to have been superseded by analytical and deductive forms. It has taken the feminist movement to bring back the personal into academic studies and thereby revive the importance of the story. The approach to theology, that has characterized women, is to tell a story and then to reflect upon it. Some chapters will appropriate this method.

In doing theology women adopt a perspectival approach rather than analysis and critique of existing works. They grant that there are unique insights that come from individuals from contexts other than one's own and that there is something to be appreciated from that which is different. Other people's thoughts and arguments become stimulants, and not points of argument aimed at establishing what is definitive. Rather, the approach is that of dialogue as women aim at affirmations, continued questioning of tradition in view of contemporary challenges, and as they struggle with making their own contribution to the creation of theologies that respond to the demands of spirituality. There is very little refutation and apologetic to be gleaned from African women's theology. What is present are statements of faith and the basis for such affirmations.

### **Biblical Hermeneutics and African Culture**

African women's theology constructed at their own pace, from their own place, portrays their priorities and perspectives. There has been an emphasis on survival, as they have to live so that they may be present in this life to struggle to disclose God's hand in their lives and in the actualities of Africa. Together, with the emphasis on context, is the place of the Bible. Skills for the interpretation of the Bible and culture from their own location have become a major challenge for women theologians especially as the Bible has become part of the African context. The need to distinguish the good that is liberating has turned the attention of many to biblical as well as cultural hermeneutics. Therefore, in theologizing, African women resort to tradition but they do so with skills for critical examination.

Cultural hermeneutics enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberating.

Since the Bible depicts other peoples' cultures, and we know from African culture that not everything in culture is liberating, we come to the Bible with the same cautious approach we have to culture. Any interpretation of the Bible is unacceptable if it does harm to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless. There are two sides to treating culture as a principle for hermeneutics. Taking culture as a tool with which to understand and interpret one's reality, and specifically the Bible, allows one to take one's experience seriously and to connect it with other realities. Culture is a broad concept, which always needs fine tuning, but in the African women's language, the broad description used for it is 'What human beings have made from nature, and because of nature and community'. All that is not nature has been 'cultivated', worked upon, devised, dreamed up, and given shape and meaning by the human mind and hands. *Culturing*, therefore, is a continuous activity of the human community, and culture has become the locus of resistance.

The other aspect of the appropriation of culture is evident in devising a hermeneutic of liberation to identify the positive aspects of culture and to promote them. The dynamism of culture demands that all take the responsibility to contribute to its evolution. So cultural hermeneutics directs that we take nothing for granted, that we do not follow tradition and ritual and norms as unchangeable givens, and that cultural relativism does not become covert racism and ethnocentrism. Life is to be lived deliberately, intentionally and consciously and where this practice has been lost we have to create awareness of life experiences and their implications. Experiences are to be analyzed, not only for their historical, social and ethical implications, but also for their capacity to create what grows to become cultural norms. African women have identified culture as a favorite tool for domination. That double culture leads to double oppression is the experience of all colonized peoples. In Africa, however, what we have to contend with is multiple cultures and multiple oppressions. In appropriating or critiquing culture, coping devices are discouraged as they only play into the patriarchal scheme. What we seek are strategies for transforming attitudes, beliefs and practices. We always ask of culture, how do I understand this experience, how does it relate to my context, who is benefiting? Is it just?

In cultural hermeneutics, one faces the challenge of struggling with one's culture while fencing off those waiting to use our culture to under-rate us. Cultural hermeneutics seeks a critique from within, and not an imposition from without. The challenge of cultural hermeneutics

is the methodology. How does one recuperate historical memory, re-reading myths that are empowering while critiquing domesticating ones. We face the challenge of how to uncover the messages of cultural codes, myths, symbolisms and rituals, while never losing sight of the fact that contexts get more and more specific, the closer one gets to particular experiences and particular individuals.

Taking steps towards cultural hermeneutics we have found a few footholds on the path. There are no absolute truths in human affairs and human culture.

- Culture is frequently a euphemism to protect actions that require analysis.
- We need to interpret our own culture, engage in inter-cultural dialogue, and work towards cultural transformation.
- Keen sensitivity to the plurality of cultures and the dynamism of particular cultures is essential.
- Domesticating cultural practices thrive on the power of myth to go unchallenged, therefore 'Stop acting on these practices, and reflect on them.'
- Identify and promote what sustains and enhances life.
- Develop a keen sensitivity to the inherent dangers of tying identity to culture.

Illustrative of African women's concern for cultural hermeneutics are the writings of Oduyoye and Kanyoro. Oduyoye seeks parameters for identifying cultural elements that are life-affirming for women in Africa, whether they are validated by traditional Christian teaching or not. Key to this search is women's full humanity and participation in religion and society. Elements deemed incompatible with the gospel of fullness of life are studied for the cracks that may lead to transformation and the intransigence that call for prophetic condemnation. She allies cultural hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics and finds this a very fertile area for imaginative theological reflection. Most African women use the Bible in very traditional ways following those of the schools of theology at which they studied. Several, however, have developed very creative ways of retelling biblical events so that they reflect the actual experiences of African women (Landman 1996).

Euro-American feminist theologians have alerted us to the hermeneutics of suspicion and that of commitment. The cultural hermeneutics being proposed combines both, as it shows African women taking a