

# Gendering inculturation in Africa: a discussion of three African women theologians' entry into the inculturation scene

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## **Introduction**

In theological circles in Africa, there has been an interest as to how cultural contexts must and will shape theology. Therefore, since the 1960's, African theologians have engaged in so-called 'inculturation'. Inculturation means an attempt to reformulate and re-interpret the gospel so that the gospel can be at home in African culture. This attempt is an ongoing process, which involves a dialogue between the gospel and culture, or cultures.<sup>1</sup> The two elements 'culture' and 'gospel' necessarily interact and this interaction calls for a measure of re-interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Previously, missionary Christianity tended to devalue traditional African culture and dismiss it as pagan and heathen. African worldview and tradition were considered unworthy and at best to be abandoned.

Yet, it is unrealistic to regard inculturation as a finished task. By virtue of inculturation being ongoing, it is insufficient to strictly hold on to the earlier presentations by African male theologians. For this reason, African women theologians have understood

the need to contribute to this ongoing process, and in so doing bring in new perspectives. A common notion in feminist theology is that gender refers to socially acquired roles and positions designated as fitting to either males or females at a given time in its history. According to the theologian Anne-Louise Eriksson, gender may be said to refer to a socially constructed, acquired identity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in general, gender can be defined as socially constructed roles, positions and identities that vary historically and cross-culturally.

Yet, a development in gender scholarship has pointed out that gender too can be understood as a process and that this will have an effect on how we understand the workings of society at both the micro and macro level. According to sociologist Judith Lorber, if gender itself is understood as a dynamic process, some will refer to the same process as 'gendering' while others will use the notion 'doing gender'. This implies that both men and women are seen as embodying constructed roles and identities at all levels - the interactional, interpsychic, organisational, institutional and cultural practices of entire societies.<sup>4</sup>

African women theologians whilst engaging in the practice and discourse of inculturation are making attempts at 'gendering inculturation'. Gendering inculturation designates the process of integrating a strategic and social understanding of women as a distinct group, thereby incorporating women's cultural experience and including a commitment to the emancipation of women into inculturation. This is mainly how they reframe the inculturation debate: by gendering it.<sup>5</sup>

This paper discusses three African women theologians' contribution to the Christology debate within African theology of inculturation and their attempt to utilise feminist analysis of women's subordination. The three are active members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.<sup>6</sup> Further, they are part of the organising caucus of the Circle made up of ten African women theologians, namely Mercy Oduyoye, Elizabeth Amoah, Teresa Okure, Rosemary Edet, Rose Zoe-Obianga, Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge, Mary Getui, Nasimiyu Wasike and Teresa Hinga.<sup>7</sup> The coordinator of the Circle, Musimbi Kanyoro states:

In coming late to the scene, African women theologians are

caught in the dilemma of disagreeing with the presentation of inculturation as the basis for African liberation theology. While affirming the need for reclaiming culture through the theology of inculturation, we African women theologians make the claim that inculturation is not sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analysed and are deemed worthy in terms of promoting justice and support for life and the dignity of women... Pursuing a theology of inculturation from a gender and feminist perspective is a new step forward.<sup>8</sup>

The male perspective in African theology has been dominating in as far as efforts towards inculturation in Africa are concerned since African women's experiences have been considered either insignificant on its own or subsumed under the males' category of human experience. Consequently, inculturation has been tacitly gendered from a male perspective since traditionally, an analysis of women's subordination has not been integrated in the task of inculturation. In view of this, for inculturation in Africa to adequately account for human life, it has to contend with not only the lives and thoughts of African males but also of African females.

### **Sources and main actors in inculturation**

There are a number of sources for an inculturated African Christianity. This paper explores the source of 'Christology'. Therefore, this paper highlights the presentation by John Pobee<sup>9</sup> as representative of African male theologians Christology and that of Mercy Oduyoye, Anne Nasimiyyu and Teresa Hinga as representatives of African female theologians<sup>10</sup> Christology.

#### *Pobee and inculturation with reference to Christology*

John Pobee's approach to Christology is a functional one. It focuses on the deeds of Jesus that result in an image of Christ to the believer. He asks,

Who is Jesus Christ? ... How does he affect my life? Why should an Akan (a tribe in Ghana) relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation?<sup>11</sup>

Pobee notes that the Akan outlook prefers concreteness to

abstraction. For this reason, the Jesus of Nazareth is expressed in terms of Jesus' activity. To him, Jesus as a human being fully participated in the human community. Consequently, Jesus brings humans into a new community, his body. This new community transcends the old clan, family and tribe, giving way to the totality of the community of the church, which is in true keeping with African notions. He notes that the central issue in any evangelism is Christology.<sup>12</sup>

Relating Christ's' divinity in his authority and power to judge with the Akan ancestors, Pobee states that,

In Akan society, the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for the good life and punish evil. And the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being. Our approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest ancestor - in Akan language *Nana*. With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil. Again, in our context, we shall seek to emphasize that even if Jesus is *Nana* like the other illustrious ancestors, he is a nonpareil of a judge; he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closest to God and as God. As *Nana* he has the authority over not only the world of men but also of all spirit beings, namely the cosmic powers and the ancestors.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus as God-man is superior to all ancestors and all spiritual beings. Jesus is *Nana* functionally with regard to Christology in Akan African theology, of the ancestors and the Supreme Being.

Further, in exploring Christology, Pobee goes on to utilise the titles that are used in traditional African societies as a source for inculturation in Africa. Still, in his contribution to Christology, Jesus can be thought of as *Okyeame*, meaning "*linguist*".<sup>14</sup> Since God in Akan Religion is perceived of as great and big, he has to be approached through his official spokesperson called *Okyeame*. Jesus as *Okyeame* is a chief, exercising royal authority. This "royal, priestly Christology" is relevant to Akan Christians and speaks to most West African hearts. Jesus as *Nana* and as *Okyeame* translates Christology into categories that are genuine African categories.

However, a problem with such an expression of Christology is

that it confines Christ to a very limited area. God presented as 'Big' in the Judeo-Christian tradition is also a Father. Christ as Okyeame is a tenuous link therefore, it cannot provide a very firm basis for an African - as opposed to a local - Christology. Jesus, if described as Okyeame is placed apart from those who have been silenced in society, those whose voices are unheard because of the power structures.

### *Deficiency of inculturation as earlier presented*

As previously mentioned, inculturation as a process involves a dialogue between the gospel and culture, and these cultures are dynamic - not static. Since inculturation is ongoing, it is in itself deficient to hold on to the earlier presentations by African male theologians.

Pobee's presentation of Christology as a source for inculturation in Africa is lacking since he utilises a high Christology in both instances and in so doing, is unable to relate to the cries of the underprivileged and the downtrodden. The Akan is a patriarchal society. As such, it is a society characterised by asymmetric dualisms thereby legitimizing patriarchal relations of domination and subordination as "natural difference".

But why do we want to see Christ fit into terms that denote a patriarchal society? Will not this merely contribute to the oppression and exploitation of women in society? Indeed, it is problematic to regard Jesus as a great ancestor. With the strict division of labour among the Akan traditional society, how would an Akan great ancestor relate to the work of women or to childcare?

The experience of women has not been utilized in the quest for an inculturated Christianity. In effect, a feminist perspective leads to a new interpretation of Christology for an inculturated Christianity in Africa, which is a more comprehensive and just approach. Since inculturation has not been able to identify and utilise women's experience as a criteria for evaluation, it has created an imbalance by not taking into consideration the perspective of the female subject. Therefore, inculturation has not used the understanding of women as a distinct group. In general, inculturation has not used gender as an analytical tool neither has it had a commitment to the emancipation of African women understood as a distinct social group.

## **African women theologians and inculturation with reference to Christology**

### *Oduyoye and Christology*

In this section particular reference is made to the presentation of Christ by John Pobee as opposed to those of Mercy Oduyoye, Anne Nasimiyu Wasike and Teresia Hinga. Two Classical Christologies that have been taught by missionaries in Africa include those of; Christ enthroned in glory, overseeing all and ordering all according to the will of God; a royal Christ who is a conqueror of all and who will at the end of the age wipe away all evil.

However, a focus on the end of the age is in itself inadequate. To live here and now is the most important concern for the African religious activities and beliefs. According to Oduyoye, "Disinterested religious zeal or one aimed at extraterrestrial well-being is not an indigenous African Spirituality. Spirituality in Africa is one of struggle that enables persons to live a good life here and now that they may die 'a good death' and join the ancestors."<sup>15</sup> In other words, there is little concern with distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical, since no line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical, and this helps us understand the concentration of African religiosity.

A focus on the end of the age hides the relevance of Christ in the business of living today and in the immediate future. To Oduyoye, such a Christology is not updated to the task of empowering Christians for life in Africa today. Indeed, in the light of the African worldview, a holistic view of life is presented and to have this integrated in Christology in Africa is very important. The Christ presented in Africa ought to be one that affects the whole life and shows that there is nothing in the life of the African person that is not the business of God in the now. Consequently, African people have need of well-being in the now and in the near future and demand a Christology that explicates the same.

### *Nasimiyu and Christology*

Following interviews conducted by Nasimiyu about women's experiences in relation to Jesus, several factors emerge. These include, their Christian concepts of Jesus which they learnt from their catechism, their holistic view of life where Jesus affects the

whole life, their belief in the reality of evil powers from which Jesus has to save them, and the courage to suffer and endure hardships with the hope that soon all these will be over.<sup>16</sup>

For Nasimiyu, the East African woman's experience calls for a Christology that is based on a holistic worldview.<sup>17</sup> She needs a Christ who affects the whole of her life. Jesus takes on the qualities of a mother not only to women but also to all men and women disciples. Jesus is a nurturer of life, especially the life of the weak. Jesus' motherhood is characterized by nourishment, protection and care for the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed and the marginalized. However, "though Jesus takes on the qualities of a mother, women should not be seen as merely child bearers".<sup>18</sup>

### *Hinga and Christology*

Hinga's starting point is in a description of the Christology that found expression in missionary praxis where she observes that two images of Christ were expressed. The first prevailing image of Christ was that of Christ the conqueror who legitimized the subjugation of the African race during the period of colonial and imperial expansionism. Jesus was the King in whose name new territories both physical and spiritual, were fought for, annexed and conquered. An imperial Christianity thus had an imperial Christ to match where winning Africa for Christ was a major motivating factor.

The second image in missionary praxis was that of Christ the liberator. The mission stations established by missionaries in the African interior served as orphanages and shelters. Women took shelter in the mission stations in their attempts to be free from unsatisfactory marriages or harsh parental control. For Hinga, the Christ of the missionary enterprise was an ambivalent one, a conqueror legitimising subjugation and a liberator.

However, presently, in the African's woman's Christology, the perceptions of Christ include Christ as a personal friend who helps African women bear their grief, loneliness and suffering. Christ is an iconoclastic prophet who stands out as a critic of the status quo, an image often found within African Independent Churches. African women are victims of oppression and muteness in society therefore, an image of Christ that is popular is one that

blends Christology with pneumatology, especially in the African Independent Churches, patronised mostly by women. In this case, Jesus is seen as the embodiment of the spirit, the power of God and he becomes the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless. Pneumatic Christology empowers women to be less inhibited and muted. For Hinga, women would have to be on the alert and to be critical of any versions of Christology that would be opposed to their cause. They would have to refuse any Christology that smacks of sexism and functions to entrench lopsided gender relations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Gendering inculturation in respect to Christology**

John Pobee presents a ruler-image and reserves the ruler for God and makes Christ the *Okyeame* through whom the ruler speaks and also through whom the people's voice reaches the ruler. In general, the *Okyeame* is as the chief exercising royal authority and is treated as the very ruler when holding the staff of the office.

However, the human experience of such hierarchically organized systems and usually patriarchal structures leaves a lot to be desired. The oppressed and the marginalized are left the same way, helpless in view that such hierarchical structures have little room for the participation of those on the underside, whose humanity is being trampled on. Indeed, when Pobee suggests Christ as the *Okyeame* of God the ruler, to him the *Okyeame* can only be male.

It can be noted that African males may have also taken up the same attitude to suppose that they speak on behalf of women and children and in so doing they are self-appointed spokesmen, therefore, leaving women mute. According to Oduyoye, "An African woman perceives and accepts Christ as a woman and as an African. The commitment that flows from this faith is commitment to full womanhood (humanity), to the survival of human communities, to the 'birthing', nurturing and maintenance of life, and to loving relations and life that is motivated by love".<sup>20</sup> She also states that "in the African women's Christology, no distinction is made between salvation and liberation".<sup>21</sup> For Nasimiyyu and Hinga, the Christ whom African women worship, honor and depend on is the anointed one who liberates from all oppression, the companion, friend, teacher and, caring compassionate nurtu-



rer of all. He is also the servant that washed the feet of the disciples and the reconciler.

### **Conclusion**

Hopefully, a gendered African inculturation theology is able to contend with the thoughts and lives of both African females and males and therefore adequately account for human life. It may be able to articulate differentiation and be critical, thereby maintain open endedness in African inculturated Christology.

Further, I hope that this discussion has raised new questions and pointed to new avenues of thought, which may have been suppressed or overlooked. One is the construction of an African inculturated Sophialogy<sup>22</sup> which would involve a reinterpretation and re-articulation of the name and images of Sophia into African categories. This could help serve the purpose of having an emancipatory Christology in Africa, where Jesus, as the incarnation of Sophia, divine feminine and human masculine nature is incorporated.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Given the geographical extent of Africa and the diversity of Africa's people, they do not share in a single culture. There are varieties of cultures. I do bear in mind the problem of broad generalisations. However, for practical purposes in this paper, reference is made to African culture.

<sup>2</sup> It is crucial to disassociate ourselves from some of the common but inadequate attempts of understanding inculturation. For some, inculturation primarily means finding suitable rituals or symbols in a given culture to express the Christian faith. However, inculturation does not simply mean finding suitable cultural expressions for our Christian faith (Waliggo, J. *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*. Uganda: St. Paul's Publications, 1986, p.8). Such an understanding is inadequate because it does not attend to the entirety of human life and culture being able to be in dialogue with the gospel. The finding of suitable expressions is only but the manifestation of inculturation.

According to the theologian Stuart Bate, inculturation is approached in a variety of ways depending on the subject of the inculturation process. The subject may firstly be the gospel, where the incarnation of the gospel in native cultures is looked at. Secondly, the subject may be Jesus, where Jesus Christ becomes incarnated and is the real subject of inculturation. This model attempts to discover the Jesus who is already present in the culture and allow him to come to full view and also transform the Christ who has been preached within a western cultural matrix; third, the subject can also be people, and fourth, the subject may be the church (Bate, Stuart C. *Inculturation and Healing: Coping-Healing in South African Christianity*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995, pp.231-235).

Leaning on the incarnational model for inculturation, Shorter suggests that inculturation is the process where a human culture is in dialogue with the gospel and this presupposes a measure of reformulation or more accurately re-interpretation. However, to him the gospel is the good news and Jesus is the good news. Therefore, the gospel ought to be seen in terms of its ultimate essence - Jesus Christ. Consequently, what is inculturated is Jesus Christ himself (Shorter, A. *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*. Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989, pp.59-62). Similarly, the theologian Teresa Okure uses this approach for inculturation. Shorter and Okure are Catholics and this treatment of inculturation as Christ becoming 'incarnated' in a particular culture has been adopted by the present Pope, thus by extension, the Catholic fraternity. However, according to the 1981 research seminar on missions, it was agreed that what is inculturated is the gospel, or more accurately, faith in the gospel (Okure, Teresa et al. *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*. Eldoret, Kenya: AMECA Gaba Publications, 1990, pp.103-104). See also Shorter, A., op.cit., p.11 and Waliggo, J., op.cit., p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Eriksson, A. *The Meaning of Gender in Theology: Problems and Possibilities*. Uppsala: A.L. Eriksson, 1995, p.26.

<sup>4</sup> Previously, gender had been confined to sex difference debates and sex role debates. Within sex difference debates, the intention was usually to define the nature and extent of sex differences. Sex role debates shifted questions

to those of origin, such as biological versus social and historical factors, and those of purpose such as functionality versus relations of dominance. Ferree, M., Lorber, J. and Hess, B., eds. *Revisioning Gender*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999, p.xix.

- 5 See Maseno, L. *Gendering the inculturation debate: A critical discussion of four African women theologians' entry into the inculturation scene and how their perspectives contribute to 'gender' and reframe the inculturation debate*. Unpublished Master Thesis. University of Oslo, 2004.
- 6 There is a consensus in Africa that the Circle is representative of African women's theological perspectives. Any representative coverage of African women's theology must take into consideration the Circle.
- 7 Pemberton, C. *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue with the West*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003, p.15.
- 8 Kanyoro, M. 'Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century'. *Talitha Cum!: Theologies of African Women*. Njoroge, N. and M. Dube, eds. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001, pp.167,169.
- 9 John Pobee is a native of Ghana. He studied African and Christian religion in Africa, England, Germany and the United States. Between 1974 and 1975, he wrote the book titled *Toward an African Theology*. Pobee has also served in the World Council of Churches. Currently, Pobee is a professor of New Testament and Church History at the University of Ghana at Legon.
- 10 Oduyoye attended the University of Ghana at Legon. In 1963, she studied theology at Newham College, Cambridge University. She served as the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. She is fondly known as the Mother of the Circle. She has published many books. According to Pemberton, "Oduyoye's work is consistently cited by writers working in African American womanist theology, by other EATWOT colleagues and by members of the international commission on violence" (Pemberton, op.cit., p.64).

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Church and which is particularly inspired by Marian devotion.

- <sup>11</sup> Pobee, J.S. *Toward an African Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979, p.81.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.98.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.94.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.95.
- <sup>15</sup> Oduyoye, M. 'The Christ for African Women'. *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. Oduyoye, M. and V. Fabella, eds. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988. p.40.
- <sup>16</sup> Nasimiyu, W. 'Jesus and an African Woman's Experience'. *Jesus in African Christianity*. Mugambi, J. and L. Magesa, eds. Nairobi: Initiatives Publication, 1989, p.126.
- <sup>17</sup> Nasimiyu points out Christological models that emerge in African women's reflections as eschatological, anthropological, liberational and cosmological.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid p.131.
- <sup>19</sup> Hinga, T. 'Violence Against Women: A Challenge to the Church'. *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging Essays on Pastoral Theology*. Kinoti, H. and D. Waruta, eds. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1994, pp. 261-268.
- <sup>20</sup> Oduyoye, M., op.cit., pp. 44-45.
- <sup>21</sup> Oduyoye, M. *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p.64.
- <sup>22</sup> The female figure of wisdom in Greek (*Sophia*) is an area that the theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has worked on elaborately by examining the feasibility of a feminine Christology.

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