

Revisiting the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today: A lesson in strength and perseverance

**Author:**Helen A. Labeodan¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Helen Labeodan,
kunbial@yahoo.com**Dates:**

Received: 02 Feb. 2016

Accepted: 11 Apr. 2016

Published: 08 July 2016

How to cite this article:Labeodan, H.A., 2016, 'Revisiting the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians today: A lesson in strength and perseverance', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37(2), a1586. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i2.1586>**Copyright:**© 2016. The Authors.
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This article sets out to do a historical review of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians from its inception to date. An appraisal of the challenges of the founding mothers will be critically analysed, how they were able to overcome obstacles as African women theologians in a society that is predominantly patriarchal and how the Circle was able to inspire African women to become subjects of their own histories, lives and stories. This article will reflect on the experiences of the founding mothers and how they were able to identify and reinterpret some of the oppressive African cultures and strategies for overcoming them. The research methodology for this article will be qualitative. One of the major key players in the founding of the Circle – Mercy Amba Oduyoye – will be interviewed. It is expected that the wealth of experience of the legacy of Circle women theologians will help to resolve the current impasse within the Circle.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In this article, the author critically reviewed the legacy of African women circle theologians. This was done by examining the history of Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, their source of strength and how they were able to persevere over the years.

In the beginning

The colonial experience that introduced Western gender perceptions and practices affected the traditional involvement of African women in the development of their societies, leading to women's marginalisation and economic and political disempowerment (Amadiume 2005). It also helped to reinforce the patriarchy inherent in the African culture (Masenya 2000:69). This could also be responsible for women's marginalisation in theological enterprise. However, the struggle against colonisation resulted in the fore-grounding of gender inequality and oppression in African cultures (Dube 1999:216).

Theologising is seen mainly as male prerogative; hence, women for a very long time were excluded, mostly black women. Against this bedrock, Mercy Amba Oduyoye averred that women need to be visible in theology and also in religion and culture because these were areas that affected them directly (M. Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 October 2015). Culture, majorly from the perspective of the founding mothers of the Circle, is germane to the African women. These women also noted unfortunately that culture is both oppressive and liberating (Kanyoro 2002:17; Oduyoye 1994:177).

According to Amadiume (2005), there were important achievements made by so-called primitive women in Africa that women in the most powerful nations in the world today are still not able to accomplish. Amadiume raised the question that how could women, who were chiefs, queens and empresses in pre-colonial Africa, not be allowed to be presidents and prime ministers in the postcolonial modern period? This could also be the reason why women are excluded from most important issues that affect their lives directly. If the census of any worship centre is to be taken, be it a mosque, church or shrine, it will be discovered that women most times, if not all of the times, are in the majority. One then wonders why they will not be made leaders in these places of worship. For instance, in the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria, women cannot be pastors and they are also not allowed to sit on the altar, but the irony here is that they are the ones that clean the altar (Ogungbile pers. comm., 20 September 2015). Issues affecting women directly are not given due attention as expected.

The inspiration to establish the Circle by Mercy Amba Oduyoye was as a result of Constance Buchanan's solidarity. Buchanan used her position at Harvard to open doors for African women

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theologians to reflect and write in a safe space (Bam 2007:v). Before this time, Africa was generally not considered worthy of representation, particularly at such eminent institutions as Harvard. According to Bam (2007:v), Buchanan had the foresight to create a space for African women to spend a year at Harvard doing research and writing on the whole new era of what was called feminist theology. This opened a general window of opportunity for African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, one of Africa's leading women theologians, became a beneficiary of this ecumenical project.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye reiterated the above fact during an interview. She claimed that this laudable opportunity launched her into theological research and writing that is unprecedented among women theologians in Africa. It was during this period that she published her first book, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (1986). This has been followed by numerous other publications (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 October 2015). Her exposure at Harvard inspired her to gather African women, and this gathering of women later cumulated into what is today known as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. This was to encourage the involvement of more women in the theological discourse and study in Africa, which was initially a male-dominated domain. According to Bam (2007:vii), Buchanan planted the seed that bears fruit to produce African women theologians. Women were moved from being the consumers of theology to being producers of theology.

This article explicitly states how we can look back and cling to the legacies that preserved the founding mothers of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; (which was officially launched in Accra, Ghana in 1989). In addition, the paper revisits the legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian (hereafter referred to as the Circle). This article reviews the history of the Circle, take an objective look at the challenges faced by the founding mothers, how they were able to reinterpret oppressive African cultures and what were the strategies that they put in place to overcome them. Furthermore, it also takes a critical appraisal of the strength of these women and how they were able to persevere over the years. This article will culminate in using the strength of the founding mothers to make an attempt at resolving the current impasse in the Circle.

Historical review of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

The inspiration of having a Circle is attributed to Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who is the founder of the Circle who birthed the vision (Phiri & Nadar 2007). Mercy Amba Oduyoye felt the importance of the Circle because as a theologian, she discovered that the voices and perspective of African women were not included in African theology. She was inspired and realised that the voices of women must be represented in

African theology. Also, by the fact that she was usually the only women invited to theological meetings, whereas there are still other women who are in theological settings but who were in the obscure little corner made invisible by the male counterpart. For there to be any impact, more women must be brought on board. To accomplish this feat of having women's voices heard in African theology, a space specifically meant for men, she went in search of women in theology who were either teaching in a university or a theological institution and got them to be members of Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologian (EATWOT). Theresa Okure and Rosemary Edet of blessed memory were the first set of women she introduced into EATWOT. The Circle became a safe space for African women to gather and tell their stories. It was an inclusive space. It accommodated all, regardless of colour, creed or race; as long as you are a woman, you are welcome. Most times, women are seen as the least able to formally contribute to faith discussions because patriarchy systems robbed them of the power of choice and voice (Monohan 2004). According to Monohan (2004), theology for the Circle is meaningless unless it is lived. It is for this reason that often time, they directly challenge the West to reform, renew or create behaviour that promotes the holistic living of the world community. A community where everyone's voice is heard and respected – be it women, children and men making their different contributions to make the community whole.

The Circle is a community of African women theologians who come together to discuss issues of common concerns based on their experiences in their different religions and cultures. Oduyoye did not stop at just making the African women members of EATWOT; she used the platform to inspire other women and also share the vision of the Circle with them which culminated into meeting annually in regions of Africa and for a Pan Africa meeting every 5 years. Between 1980 and 1981, Oduyoye was getting African women into EATWOT (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 September 2015). The African women theology was being practised through membership of EATWOT.

The first meeting of Circle was in 1980 in Ibadan, Nigeria. Oduyoye categorically stated that, it was all her initiative to look for other women in theological setting as mentioned earlier in this article; she never called any women together before taking the initiative to found the Circle (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 September 2015). All she was doing was basically inspiring other women and selling the idea to them. The breakthrough came when she got back to the World Council of Churches (WCC) as Deputy General Secretary, where she got the needed help. All the while she was teaching in Ibadan, Nigeria, she was using her own money, time and resources.

At the WCC, she got the needed help and support. The women (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 September 2015) picked the project and gave it their best. For the 1989 meeting, she compiled the list of those who attended the meeting.

The meeting was then funded by the Methodist women, Presbyterian women and *Missio*. She sent out a proposal, and these bodies supported the Circle project. However, as Deputy General Secretary, she is not a programme's staff, but Prof. John Pobee, whose jurisprudence covered this, promised and agreed to make the Circle one of the theological education programmes. So, all the finances were managed by John Pobee's office. Later, the Africa desk of the WCC also got interested and also supported Oduyoye's initiative. This support birthed the Circle meeting of 1989 in Trinity Theological College in Accra, Ghana. It was at this meeting that a decision was taken to institutionalise the Circle, so from the 1989 meeting in Accra, Ghana, to 1980 meeting in Ibadan, Nigeria, Mercy Amba Oduyoye was initiating the Circle bringing women together and letting them know it is time to speak out and no longer be silent. At this meeting, there was no President or coordinator; the women were told to go back home and form the Circle in their regions and discuss 'their own' concerns. At the 1989 meeting, there were no offices like there are today. It was also at this meeting that the decision was taken to work for one sabbatical – that is 7 years – and come back again and re-evaluate.

The 1989 meeting which actually institutionalised the Circle could also be said to be the first pan-African meeting. This meeting had 70 women in attendance from different countries in Africa. In August 1996, the second pan-African conference of the Circle was held in Kenya and 140 women were in attendance (Njoroge 1997:77). It was at this meeting that offices were created. The first general coordinator was appointed – Musimbi Kanyoro – and regional and linguistic coordinators were also appointed to oversee the smooth running of the Circle's affairs.

It should be noted here that a criteria for attending a Circle meeting is the presentation of a paper which is usually in line with the theme of the conference. At the end of the 1989 meeting, Oduyoye and Kanyoro sorted the papers, and there were academic papers that were published in *The Will to Arise*; every other paper that was publishable went into *Talitha Cumi*. This was as a result of the fact that the women were told that their papers will be published. This also gave birth to *Amka Publication*. This was meant for publications, written by the women in attendance, that could not go into the books. Publication was crucial for this initiative to be successful; it was an avenue for the women to tell their own stories and to be read. All these while, the activities of the Circle were funded by Prof. John Pobee's desk of theological education in WCC.

What are the concerns of the Circle?

According to Mwaura (2015:90), African women theologians seek to take women's experience and contact seriously in their theological reflections. These experiences are shaped by particular conditions of culture, gender, class, ethnicity and race. Phiri and Sarojini (2010:93) observe that African

women theologians seek solidarity with those who suffer marginalisation of every kind, trying to understand, analyse and change the systems of domination and abuse of power. African women theologians consider themselves as 'activist theologians' committed to the struggle for gender justice through their involvement in an organisation of social development, social welfare, conducting gender sensitisation, HIV and AIDS, anti-poverty, and culture and Bible study workshops as individuals and groups (Mwaura 2015:90). Their concern is also to be advocates of gender justice and to transform the patriarchy that is prevalent in both places of worship and society. The Circle is also concerned about ensuring that African women have a 'safe space' to reflect on and discuss diverse issues that are of paramount importance to them. They critically evaluate culture and religion in all their varied expressions in order to expose patriarchal, sexist and imperialist tendencies. In all these, the Circle is also concerned not only in women's struggle for liberation for themselves alone but also in liberating and empowering all humanity. African women's theology and concern are a protest against women's forced silence and a wake-up call to African women to rise and fight against the forces of injustice that surround them (Hinga 1996:28). According to Fredrick (2003), African women's theology is life affirming, socially sensitive and geared towards dialogue, and also extended to the whole of nature.

Before now, African theology has been articulated by males. But by the 1980s, the missing voice of women began to emerge. At her inauguration in 1989, the Circle embraced African women resident in Africa regardless of creed. Most importantly, their concern and commitment must be to participate in doing theology (Njoroge 1997:91). The Circle has a membership cutting across all the three major religions in Africa – Islam, Christianity and traditional religion. Part of the concerns of the Circle is to reflect on any theology that does not listen intently to women, men and children in the light of the religio-cultural, social, economic and political milieu in which we live and argues that it lacks authenticity and relevance. To accomplish this, the Circle must be inclusive, giving room for more women to explore theological and ethical issues that affect the core of their faith.

Why the word 'concerned'? This word 'concerned' in the name of the Circle is well articulated in Njoroge's (1997) article:

By calling ourselves 'concerned', we are stating that we care deeply about the erosion and destruction of human dignity and life, all life, in Africa. We are concerned that much needs to be done in the areas of religion and culture to address the social evils that block the experience of abundant life for people and the environment. We are concerned that for too long, women have been silenced and as a result many have suffered and others died because nothing was done. We are concerned that unless we name the sin of sexism and work for its elimination, our Africa religion institutions will continue and we care, we want to join with those who struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation in our continent. (p. 79)

According to Oduyoye, in an interview, she pointed out clearly that not all women are concerned. Some women do not see any need for what the Circle is doing. This is because most of the issues that the Circle is championing are against these unconcerned women's ideology and orientation. These women (who are the unconcerned ones) are the custodians. Basically, the concerns of the Circle further include condemning cultural and religious practices and attitudes destructive to the life and well-being of women. Critiquing destructive elements in the religion and culture of Africans, it also includes transforming patriarchy and decrying violence and injustice against women within both the religious and cultural spheres.

The Circle is concerned with setting women free from the bondage of the dehumanising religious doctrines and cultural practices. She is also concerned with preserving and upholding the norms of the different cultures that are women sensitive, and empowered by raising these concerns, the Circle is calling all and sundry to re-examine African theology. The Circle was largely conceived as African and it addresses the issues of African women (Fiedler & Hofmeyr 2011: 39). The Circle is a community of African women theologians who come together to reflect on what it means to them to be women of faith within their experiences of religion, culture, politics and social-economic structures in Africa (Phiri 2008).

Challenges faced by the Circle

The first resistance came from women within the group of those discovered by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Theresa Okure, a Catholic nun, queried Mercy Amba Oduyoye's initiative and who authorised her to gather women together. As far as Theresa was concerned, a male authority was needed for this initiative to take place. However, Theresa Okure after her initially scepticism became a staunch member of the Circle.

Finances

For the 1980 meeting, while sourcing for funds, the sponsors wanted to know the institution backing Oduyoye's initiative. So as a result of these queries and for the initiative to see the light of day, she had to be attached to the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) and Institute of Church and Society, because the money was coming from ecumenical bodies; it was a good policy to also say that she is attached to these ecumenical bodies. An added advantage is that she could go back to AACC for funding because she was a youth secretary before. While in Ibadan, Nigeria, she was actively involved with the Institute of Church and Society.

Oduyoye was questioned on why she did not use the university? She said that she was not thinking along the university lines at all; besides, she was new in the university. However, she still went ahead to discuss with her then Head of Department, Prof. Bolaji Idowu, who queried her bringing African women theologians together, that even on the continent, there were no African men theologians. However, he attended the meeting and, while presenting his speech, he

said a bird with one wing does not fly and he encouraged the women to grow the second wing, which is the African women theologians – for without the women, African theology will never fly. Bishop Olufosoye, the presiding Church of Nigeria Bishop of Ibadan, was invited but he did not believe in the vision of the Circle. He saw it as just a 'women thing', so he sent his wife to attend. Oduyoye alludes to the fact that the institutional backing was important; so when this is missing, there will be problems in forging ahead (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 September 2015).

Discrimination

It is of popular opinion that African women do not need liberation and any Africa woman talking about liberation is imitating the women from the Western world. This is a critical stage for the women because they are fighting discrimination, and those discriminating against them are saying that the women are okay and have no problem or concerns. Therefore, they should not strive to be liberated. This also showed Oduyoye that sexism and male chauvinism are in Africa too. The way women are spoken about shows that women are of no great value, and this can be seen in some African proverbs, wise sayings and folklores that disempower women. According to Oduyoye, some people did not see the need for women's stories to change. As far as these people were concerned, African women were just trying to be like their Western counterpart (Oduyoye pers. comm., 16 September 2015).

The Circle publications

Another major challenge faced by the Circle was distributing the publications. The Circle seeks to build the capacity of African women to contribute their critical thinking and analysis to advance current knowledge using a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture. It empowers African women to actively work for social justice in their communities and reflect on their actions in their publications (Phiri 2008).

Over the years the Circle could boast quite a number of publications. However, it was discovered that the publications were not sold, which according to Oduyoye might be a mistake as this might have been an avenue to get funds. The publications were not getting into the libraries so African women theologians were not being read. As a result of these, publications were not getting to the targeted audience, it was not helping the growth of the Circle and as such they were not being read. It was discovered that not all women were concerned about issues that affect women because it was discovered that there was resistance from some women, while trying to reinterpret cultural or religious issues that violate the rights of women as human beings.

These were some of the challenges faced shortly after the birth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. However, for some time now, since the 2007 pan-African meeting of the Circle, there has been a lull in the activities of

the Circle; some have actually asked if the Circle is still active. It is for this reason that the Cameroon experience is mentioned in this article.

The Cameroon experience – 2007 pan-African meeting

According to Oduyoye, for the Circle to heal and move forward, the Cameroon experience cannot and must not be swept under the carpet. There seems to be disintegration within the Circle after that meeting. The last pan-African meeting held in South Africa had very few women in attendance and some had to pay their way through to attend the meeting.

When the Circle became institutionalised, Musimbi Kanyoro became the first general coordinator who happens to come from one of the English-speaking countries of Africa – Kenya. At the pan-African meeting in Addis Ababa 2002, Isabel Phiri became the second general coordinator (another from an English-speaking country – Malawi). So naturally at the Cameroon meeting, it was time for the Circle to have a French-speaking general coordinator, but this did not materialise, rather the Circle sisters handed over to another coordinator – Fulata Moyo, who not only come from an English-speaking country but also from the same country and institution as her predecessor – Isabel Phiri. It should be noted that the Circle is multilingual. Hence, it is expected that other linguistic groups should be given a chance at being the general coordinator. The current general coordinator is also from an English-speaking region (West Africa). At the Cameroon meeting, it was obvious that the French-speaking members were not too happy with the re-election of another English-speaking coordinator. Most Circle sisters thought that Helene Yinda, the Francophone coordinator, should have been given a chance at this meeting. She has been faithful and committed to the Circle issues. It should also be noted that she was doing all the French translation of the Circle with the help of able assistants. We can assume that it was at this meeting that we lost most of our French-speaking members and probably some of the sponsors as well.

Strength of the Circle

Our common sense of not being full participants in our communities is what kept us going, that is, the Circle sisters were not entrenched in the doctrines and practices of their different communities that disempowered women. The women felt deprived and disempowered in their different situations. For example, the women who were ordained will tell stories on what it is to be an ordained woman – which is usually not pleasant. The Circle was a mutually supportive group. It was a space for the women to examine their lives and to see how they can cope and change. It could be called a sisterhood. It was a supportive group, mutually encouraging one another.

Initially, the Circle door was opened to all, both literates and non-literates, but it seems that, gradually, the Circle door has

been shut against the non-literates or those who are not in the academia. These are actually the women with the stories: the raw data to write qualitative academic papers. The policy of the Circle then was to speak to these women, ask for their permission, use their names, say who they are and then report their experiences. At meetings, all women are invited regardless of whether they can read or not, and during the meeting people go into their language groups and there will be interpretation.

It was a policy then in the Circle that wherever a Circle meeting takes place, the local women must be invited. It was a policy that the door of the Circle should be opened to all; the idea of the Circle is to create space to accommodate more as the circle can expand without limit. However, it has gradually become an elitist Circle where only the educated are given entrance.

The legacy of the Circle

According to Kanyoro (2006:32), 'the Mercy that I have come to know and admire is one who gets up and is on the go even when the going is hard'. This is a laudable attitude which should be imbibed by the current Circle executive. The founding mothers never gave up in the midst of hardship. So the current executive member and African women in general should not give up until the much expected positive change comes. There was also the motivation for change; it was time for African women to arise and speak up. They should no longer be silent.

Kanyoro (2006:22) mentioned that the first international planning committee consisted of the following: Dr Mercy Oduyoye, Convener (Ghana), Dr Betty Ekeya (Kenya); Dr Sr. Rosemary Edet (Nigeria), Dr Sr. Bernadette Mbuy Beya (Zaire); Dr Elizabeth Amoah (Ghana), Dr Brigalia Bam (South Africa), Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya). These women could also be regarded as the co-founding mothers of the Circle and Mercy Oduyoye as the initiator and founding mother.

Also notable is the mentoring attribute of the founding mothers. The Circle was a space for women to mentor each other through local or regional institutes. It was to be an open-ended forum, always hospitable to new people. According to Kanyoro (2006:23–31), 'Mercy Oduyoye recruited and mentored me, and soon I found myself doing the same. I told the story of the Circle and helped to secure funding from various donors, including my own organisation'. Presently, this mentoring is being done by Prof. Masenya Madipoane. She is encouraging and supporting the present executive and telling them to hang in there, no matter how hard or difficult it seems.

According to Kanyoro (2006:20–36), the Circle had lots of prominent supporters, for instance John Pobee, the former executive secretary for the theological education programme at the World Council of Churches, the Africa Desk of the World Council of Churches – the Circle's accounts were managed by the staff of the Africa desk.

Another thing that was done that kept the Circle together even after Musumbi Kanyoro was elected as general coordinator was to recognise the fact that she could not succeed without the help and support of the founding mother – Mercy Oduyoye. Kanyoro (2006:20–36) invited Mercy Oduyoye back on board because she knew that her presence would strengthen the Circle. It can be categorically said that this is now lacking in the administration of the Circle. Once the executive members finish their tenure, they cease to be active members of the Circle. Just like Musimbi Kanyoro did by inviting Mercy back into the coordinating team, the newly elected executive can do the same. Kanyoro's term was very successful because she co-opted Circle members who were passionate about the Circle.

In conclusion, there is need to go back to the study groups, earlier commissioned in 1996, namely Cultural and Biblical Hermeneutics, Women in Religion and Culture, History of Women and Ministries and Theological Education and Formation, which will also be helpful in strengthening the Circle and also be an avenue where upcoming women theologians can be mentored. It is expected that with the legacy of the founding mothers of mentoring, opening the doors of the Circle to all irrespective of creed, education or literacy and being dogged and not giving up will go a long way in strengthening the Circle. Still on the issue of mentoring, it is important as succession plan that women within the Circle with leadership qualities are identified and mentored for the continuity of the Circle. There is the need to continue to encourage our women to be educated as this will help to enhance their places within the society. And to put an end to the current impasse within the Circle, it will be apposite for the Circle at the next pan-African meeting to consider allowing the next general coordinator to come from another linguistic group other than English.

In summary, according to Socrates, 'a life that is not self examined is not worth living' (Palachuk 2003). We are unable to grow towards greater understanding of our true nature unless we take time to examine and reflect upon our life as a Circle. This is done by re-examining the Circle at the just concluded seminar on the 'Legacy of African Women Theologians' held in University of South Africa, Pretoria. This seminar was organised by Prof. Madipoane Masenya on whose shoulders the current executive is standing. It is

expected that, with this re-examining, the Circle will be able to move ahead and take her rightful place within the theological space of Africa, which will in turn make the Circle a better and safer space for African women.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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