Word and Witness:

A Theological Account of the Life and Voice of Mercy Amba Oduyoye

by

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Eboni Marshall Turman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Theology is dense and multifaceted.

It is a dense foray into questions of faith and praxis; it merges multiple interpretations of spiritual wisdom with human expression and action. It holds the progression of relational life. These are a few of its gifts.

Its shortcomings, however, are nocuous. Christian theology is the crucible in which practices of racism and sexism can be and have been maintained and spiritualized for the benefit of a few in positions of power. Theology, in this form, must be refuted; this resistance must come from the voices from within it. Most prominent have been and continue to be the voices that have struggled and forced their way in to theological conversation and relevance. The people and communities held within these voices would not be silenced. These voices know and live Christian theology at critical junctures.

One such voice is that of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. One of interruption and interrogation Oduyoye unashamedly calls the church into account through theological truth-telling. An authoritative voice over the decades, her work is one that has impacted the nature of Christian theology towards fuller inclusion of those outside the status quo within the Christian church. Her voice is one worth knowing.

Thus, this dissertation is an exercise in listening to Oduyoye in order to know her on her own terms. It is an exercise in hearing and learning about her through her own
words. It glimpses the journey of her doctrinal and theological positions and in this it pronounces that an African woman’s voice is essential to doing Christian theology with integrity and impact.

I introduce Oduyoye through what she means to Christian thought as a theologian of African decent with particular cultural convictions. She relentlessly questions the cultural and social messages and cues that aim to force African women into narrow versions of themselves under the guise of upholding theological principles. She forging innovative paths towards more theologically sound directions.

This dissertation, then, moves in three parts, the first focusing in on “voice,” the second attending to the notion of “word,” and the third examining the idea of “witness.” The conclusion illumines the interconnectedness between the notions of voice, word, and witness in Oduyoye’s theology.

Chapters one and two narrate Mercy Oduyoye’s formation through her kinship ties, cultural standpoint, and theological commitments. Here we learn Oduyoye’s name and the details of her life. We also learn of the progression of her voice: her life contours her voice, and her voice contours her elucidation of the word and witness of African women’s theology.

Chapters three and four offer Oduyoye’s doctrinal examination of the theology of God as well as explore the person and work of Jesus Christ through her explication of African women’s Christology. These chapters illumine the revelation of “word” in
African women’s theological accounts. The foundation and purpose of God and Jesus Christ in Christian precept serves as a reminder that the words that formed Christians precede Christian witness.

Chapters five and six consider human relationships and their role in revealing the divine. They tackle the “witness” aspect of Oduyoye’s theological positioning through interrogating how human relationship independently and interdependently comprise the crux of relationality. Attuned to aspects of theological practice and custom, whether cultural, religious, or both, the notion of human relationship draws attention to divine workings in the everyday lives of those overlooked or forgotten.

This theology, rich with African women’s conceptions of life and their understanding of relationship, is holistic and well grounded. It recognizes life as the platform on which African women’s theology continues to gain prominence. A religious position attentive to the lives of others proves itself to be a theological instantiation of what God in Christ called the Christian church to be.
Dedication

To women who think themselves invisible

&

To Morayo Skylar McCoy -

Dearest niece:

May all the “-isms” take such a steep tumble that one day you look at me and earnestly ask what in the world I was talking about.
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Words carry weight, but we refuse to let semantic debate divert us from the course of our liberation.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

House Rules

Hospitality lessons personally reached into the precepts of my own upbringing.

It was a strange professor of relationality for my sister and I.

As a little girl, I was taught to deny when I was offered something a minimum of three times. It was the custom, our culture. Play nice, play satisfied, deny the gift. Dance around in denial in order to present a particular image of humility that was reminiscent of the women back home. Women don’t accept things on first offer – it would be rude to, too bold. Women do not accept things on the second try, either. It would break custom. But the third time, there was something there: cultural permission.

The offer-er would push again, their eyes pleading, their gestures more grand, their desperation more palpable to offer you something good would eventually wear you down to the point where you accept it, whether it be a glass of water, a snack, a few loose bills, a plate of food. As one being offered something, you had to dance – to move back and forth between feigned satisfaction and surrender until it was okay to receive. Later, my sister and I would be groomed to be the offer-ers and no longer the receivers.
And *this* was the lesson. That which was extended was not the point – the machinations of the exchange-interaction, was.

The exchange taught us about place in relationship, about who belonged where, where people should “take their places” for this relational drama sequence. The exchange taught us something about cultural norms and expectations. They spoke into the host-guest relationship, the male-female relationship, the elder-child dynamic. They taught us for whom servitude was for. They showed us where we were on the hierarchical scale.

These exchanges mirrored human encounter, mimicked divine interaction, postulated something about proper human being – and for my sister and I, about being African, female, and adolescent. At the site of hospitable practice whether in our homes or in the homes of others, ethnicity, gender and age all converged to coronate us the chosen girls, never to be served, but always expected to offer service.

These exchanges often held a strange tone of surrender – someone was being satisfied by this game, but it was not us. Something was being attended to, cultivated within us to believe this interaction to be normal. But we were not deriving satisfaction from it, only confusion and resistance. Who was this exchange game for?

Why when, the moment we could pick up a broom, wash a dish, carry a tray of food, cook a meal – did we get to play this game more frequently? What game was this? Whose game was this?
What changed about who we were where we were expected to do the offering but was rarely offered within this game? To play a game for so long that you do not understand is an incredible feat – the game no longer lives as a game, but becomes internalized as something else. As soon as a young girl is old enough to serve others, to give of herself over to other’s comfort, it stops being amusing or confusing and enters into the territory of terrifying, infuriating, and permanent. What once was an odd game morphs and painfully tattoos itself into a girl’s skin, onto her genitals, as part of who she is. Because she is female, this is how she is expected to be. This game-turned-burden all of a sudden writes her emotions, determines how she looks at men, at elders, at her male peers. It crafts her worldview – though hospitality is supposed to be a sign of the divine, an act of welcome, a demonstration of proper encounter.

Yes, an encounter is happening, but for African girls who turn into African women, encounter happens differently. It is harmful, forced, subliminal, subtle, obvious, quiet, loud, common, foolish, frank, and eternal all in the same breath.

It takes on quality of the divine in itself in that it has the power to make her. It has the power to shape and determine her future. It knows the plans it has for her. It lords over her. It becomes her lord; it is the god who has the power over who she is and who she must become in order to be a good woman, and often, a good Christian woman. This is her culture. She is supposed to accept it. She is supposed to welcome it. This is her faith philosophy – to choose not to heed it would surely mean religious
disobedience. How is a girl, who becomes a woman, supposed to know God if a means of doing so is marked by her submission, the assumptions of her inferiority, and the requirement of her body to serve and be present to others in ways not reciprocated to her? What is this faith requirement? What faith requires the silence of its disciples?

These cultural interpretations mark the practice of hospitality as a-theological and fundamentally discordant with the theological premise that guides Christian belief. It demarcates salvific possibility from preservationist attitude.

**Code-Switching**

What are the cultural codes that teach us who we are? What modes of thought contribute to our deciphering our ontologies, our human occupation in the world? How do we figure out not only who we are in this world, but also what a life such as ours was intended to look like?

For many Africans, the answers to these questions are found in a hospitable code of conduct. This exercise of seeing another and being attentive to them materially, psychically, and even spiritually, places into full view the social and communal configurations of who we are to be in relation to others.

Hospitality is supposed to invoke a new mode of communion by reinventing the structures of power and relationship within them. Through service and in acts of deferment and kindness on the one hand, and in allowing one’s self to be welcomed, taken in, and honored by the other, we receive a story of ontology and its
counterintuitive relationship to power. In hospitality, power is jarred, dismantled through the sharing of space and resources.

We, Africans, see our truest selves in the hospitable moment – this life-sharing truth that we execute through our bodies remind us that we all hold equal space, we live counter-intuitively to the structures that claim us as one thing or another against each other, that seek to enlarge disparity. In the face of hierarchy and the structures that accompany it, in hospitable acts, we create another reality, or, rather, we unveil the reality that we were intended to live into. Something supervenient about human recognition and life together becomes apparent and present in the sharing moment, in hospitable action.

Hospitality is not only cultural custom, but divine exemplification. It is image-of-God practiced widely, wildly, and without limit. It is divine manner. If done well, if done within understandings of viewing another as equally important as or more important than one’s self, hospitality can introduce us to the cosmological presence and impact of God.

Done holistically, hospitality reinforces a modulus of liberation. It is theological practice in its salvific possibilities. Done well, it confuses the structures of how we assume the bounds of normative relationality. In its potential, hospitality transposes relational orientation: those with more power, more resources, more of everything, willingly submit to those with less, to the point that power relations are blurred,
disordered, thrown into chaos. The impact of this voluntary relational exchange is in the convergence of identities in order to create a different relational ordering, to create a new communal and social moment and epoch for future relationship. Thus, it is safe to say that implicated within the cultural practice of hospitality is a unique means of doing Christian theology, and theology of the liberative sort.

African theology, not simply African peoples, can be understood quite simply if you look at our practices of hospitality. Hospitality explains quite a bit about not only how we encounter others, but also or how we interact amongst ourselves; and in this, it also unveils a cosmological lesson. It unearths what we have learned from the divine. It is our calling card to learn of our divinity in being together – and this is best done in the exchange of wills and in the confusion of advantage and power.

There are Trinitarian and theological dimensions to the complex realities of surrendering power and control, trusting another for your care, and trusting one’s self to extend care uninhibited at the expense of one’s own benefit. Theology is found in the inner-workings of a relational love exchange. Human relationality and practices of community contain within themselves demonstrations of divine action. In how we welcome one another, God can be seen. Our theology ripens at the site of love of another; it is an unlikely source of divine expectation and experience.
Welcome to Oduyoye

I am sure you are wondering why any of this matters. Great! Hospitality introduces an entry point for theological work. Hospitality is inherently theological. How delightful! But how does this construe the point of this project? What does all of this have to with African women’s theology? And further, what does this have to do with the life and work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye? Why should she be important in our theological reasoning and considerations?

I have two responses that will direct us to that answer or at least point in that direction: First, the obvious: the musings of an African woman (myself) just made you think about the theological properties of the act of hospitality. This shows that African women hold theological vision just as curious and thought-provoking as anyone else’s. African women have been doing theology that the Christian church would do well to take seriously. Second, the details of hospitality done well make up the stuff of good theology, but done incorrectly, it makes up that which is responded to within African women’s theology, for African women are given perspective to examine theological precepts done unwisely, hurriedly, or frankly, badly. African women extract what we need to consider in our theological conclusions and to push us towards the fullest understanding of that which we, as a collective whole, thought we understood.

African women are theologians of the rarest sort; we do theology from the underside as truth is seen differently from the bottom than it is from the top.
This is why Mercy Amba Oduyoye is important for our theological conversations - without voices like hers, we are not doing theology well. At best, we are doing theology elite-ly, which, for the nature of theology, will not work. We must do theology on the ground, honestly, prophetically, and towards the truth of God’s hope and life. Theology must be done not only with the entire community in mind, but also with the entire community present in voice. Oduyoye’s life and work moves us in this direction.

Just as hospitality gives us a lens through which to glimpse theological truth and practice, it also gives us a lens through which to closely glimpse theological truth and practice! It uncovers the structures and manner in which theology and the practice of such can be true to its life-giving nature and false in its death-dealing possibility. It names the agents and actors within its drama – human beings. It accentuates how human involvement is rife with failure; within being human, the probability of theological misgiving and solemism is great. But the chances of not realizing this are greater if voices that have experienced theology as harm, are not heard.

Hospitality’s divine implications are misleading for some and it is so because of its use and misrepresentation; if it is not fully or equally extended to all, neither are its theological possibilities. As an act promoting the theological premise of inclusion, hospitality misguided signals a message of exclusion. It is positioned as reserved for a few, operational in particular ways, in self-serving and controlling ways – and this opens up a host of other issues. What are those who do not receive the divine-imitative
act of hospitality to do? How are they to see, to consider themselves? How are they to imagine the divine?

The narrative of hospitality has not always been kind to women: women are often the ones expected to extend hospitality, to be the embodiment and expression of it, but are only circumstantially receivers of it, if that. Women create and invest in the labor of hospitality without its recognition or mutual extension. Women are givers more than they are receivers, and even when receiving, it is within a construct designed to favor and shore up men. Women neither receive credit for hospitality nor acquire it in any meaningfully way. They are the outliers of a practice intrinsic to their own (assumed and sometimes assigned) practices of communal value and wellness.

Hospitality as a demonstration and sign of theology’s form and reach is not unique; many other theological precepts operate within this error and double-standard as well. I, thus, enlist the work of Oduyoye to delineate the fictitious optimism exercised towards the Christian faith, African culture, and African expression of the Christian faith. There is more than meets the eye. An eye towards the underside of these three entities will demonstrate that women’s experiences in religious and cultural exchanges are complex, centralize their privation, and require their compliance with the decrepit. And these realities are taught at an early age.

African feminist, systematic, postcolonial, and liberationist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye helps us see how practices originating in various cultural and religious
contexts can all illumine the same reality: that ingrained within hospitable practices, and practices like it, are the potential for theological abuse, mishandling, and fundamental misunderstanding. If not, hospitality as theological demonstration failing to operate as the supreme logic of practice merely becomes hospitality as a demonstration of mastery and hierarchization. Those who hold power intentionally and detrimentally preserve their status and falsely posture it as practices originally intended to ensure the wellness of the community at large. But misusing cultural practices that can easily translate into Christian precept asserts a logic of individuation over the collective.

Within this dissertation I seek theological clarity and right representation for African women. I want to give voice for Christian theology to hear loudly what African women have always said about matters still relevant to the African context as well as the Christian church. In this work, I wonder aloud where African women belong in the cycles of exchange, and where others like them fit in and have impact.

Interior to this exploration is the nature of salvation for African women. What frees them, if the things meant to benefit them serve as sources of discord? Are the possibilities of salvation found within some cultural practices? Does what we engage in in the everyday have the power to determine the telos of humanity? Are we agents just as powerful in our salvific trajectory as the God we proclaim to serve if we do not pay attention to what our cultural mores are doing and suggesting? Are we ready for that
responsibility, and if we have no choice but to be so, how might we take up this responsibility in a radical manner?

**The Scope of This Project**

This is what African women bring to the world of theological discourse: modes of thought that only experience can invoke and the daringness to assume themselves as equal voices and parts to the Christian community. The problems but also the promise of the godly work that cultural and religious precepts such as hospitality invoke require the voices of its underside to speak. This is what makes Mercy Oduyoye’s work so crucial: she supplies the stories that come with the voices that the world assumes it already knows and, thus, errantly speaks on behalf of. Her presence in theology is her refusal for this reality to continue to be true; she will not allow African women’s agency to be wrested from them. Her work wonders, what challenges does the Third World pose to Christian theology and Christian witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And further, what challenges do women within the Third World face within their own contexts? Her wonderings draw our attention to our theological locale in relation to others’ conceived, contrived, and perceived theological locations. Where are we located, theologically, in relation to each other?

Perhaps further away than we initially assumed.

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Word and Witness: A Theological Account of the Life and Voice of Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Oduyoye is my attempt at identifying and disentangling the cultural and theological habits and logic that define such practices within Christianity from the perspective of African women through the voice of the scholastic mother of African women’s theology, Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Her voice carries her stories, life-lessons, and theological conclusions, as well as those of the women she has encountered, learned from, and mentored over the course of her lifetime. Her scholarship points to the efficacy of her life. She lives into that which she claims as theological foundation and truth – that women matter just as much as men to theological discourse, that African voices unveil theological truth just as prominently as Western voices do. Now, she must convince men and women alike that this not only names her beliefs, but also God’s truth since the foundation of the world. This is humanity’s theological starting point; anything else is yielding to misdirection. Her words witness a theologically rich and complex standpoint that purports one mission alone: a proper theologizing ethic and approach in which African women are included and also centralized.

Chapter one examines the early cultural life, educational trajectory, and ecumenical associations of Mercy Oduyoye. I foreground this three-fold exploration by first examining the contextual landscape of Ghana in the early 20th century. In offering an overview of the major events of her familial, pedagogical, and ecclesial life, I trace her vocal awakening as a critical African woman theologian trailblazing a path for African
women’s voices to be taken seriously in the primarily male-dominant spaces of Christian theological discourse. Chief in this exploration is outlining her affiliation and involvement in the theologically liberationist and global feminist movements through her ecumenical participation including but not limited to the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. My approach is primarily biographical, as I trace the movement of her theological thought evolution.

Chapter two traces Oduyoye’s feminist formation through her narrations of her conceptualizing Akan Christian womanhood. Through evaluating the cultural nuances that determine her religious life and forge her epistemological conception of her matrilineal culture, recounting the tactical approach of the women of her lineage (her mothers) and their relationship to the Christian religious faith, illumining the path to her rejection of patriarchal values and their theological insistence(s), and illustrating her response of women’s hardships in African culture, the African church, and the Christian church at large, through her ecclesiical and ecumenical participation - I argue that Oduyoye’s critical yet constructive eye towards the cultures of African peoples (in this instance, the Akan people) and the Christian church universal brings to the fore how ideologies of longevity must be actively engaged for theology at its clearest, to emerge. Oduyoye’s grounded-ness within her culture and commitment to the Christian faith set
up critical theological exploration and inquiry as the root to African women’s theological perspective.

Privileging her story and the place from which her voice and perspective were first formed and given to her, Oduyoye is careful to attribute value to herself and her community as that which would shaped her theological vision. Her outlook is guided by the various stories of her people group and by the subsequent aspects of her identity-formation as an educated and ecclesially-focused Akan woman. The trajectory of her upbringing allowed her space to explore not only the details of her communal identity, but also that of those she encountered who informed and impacted her theological lens. These factors led her to the early determination that her (theological) temperament would be one of truth-seeking and truth-telling. Her tongue was shaped early on to not only question her theological and cultural foundations, but also to seek alternative means of articulating what is true about the discourse of theology and the specific doctrinal minutiae within it.

Chapter three examines Oduyoye’s doctrinal conception of God. Within her framing, Oduyoye carefully notates two conceptions of the God-Creator figure prominent in both African cultural-religious tradition and Western conception that ground her claims. She pronounces that the God that Africans knew before Christian colonial encounter to not be so different from the God that Jesus Christ claims. In this, Oduyoye does not assert two Gods, but indicates an incomplete conception of the divine
if African articulations of God are not seriously considered as contributing to the richest understanding of God. Her syncretic approach illumines her methodology of centering African traditional religious interpretation within Christian theological designation. African culture is not to be overridden, but considered alongside of Western-originated God-claims.

God is articulated as a Creator/creative Supreme Being who inscribes life to all God has created. God is not necessarily gendered, but within the gender debate that surrounds conceptions of God, Oduyoye examines how God is described within such terms to ascribe comprehensible language for God’s creation to understand God. In this, she pronounces to humanity, in means people can easily relate to, no matter their cultural heritage or history, that humanity’s lack of grasping God bespeaks God’s vastness and nature. God exceeds category, yet, for human understanding, must be understood within such – this creates debate about the nature of God and further the epistemology of humanity.

Chapter four demonstrates that in order for Christian theology to take African women’s perspectives seriously, it needs to reimagine how it considers Christ and who it considers Christ to be in the world. Oduyoye’s fundamental challenge is towards the church, globally and locally, within the African context, to see Christ through the experiential lens of African women. Christ can then be seen as a figure of liberation from the confines of cultural and religious standards. Christ exceeds the boundaries African
and Western culture places upon his ministerial impact and manifestation; he demonstrates the details of true life. Given the historical accounts most popular and present within the Christian church are those purported by male voices, Oduyoye makes a radical claim: that women are the ones who fact have the clearest view and thus prime perspective, therefore, Christological epistemology must come from women. To ignore the accounts and hermeneutics of women is to misread and misinterpret the work of Christ.

What Oduyoye draws out for us is the reality that women determine who Christ is for the church just as much as men do. Given this principle, the clearest picture of Christ is not found in male-constructed ecclesial musings about who Christ was, but primarily through the words of women, for women offer honest accounts of who Christ is as sufferer, redeemer, and victor. Those on the underside know Jesus best, for it is their conditions in which the Messiah entered into, took pity upon, and moved about the earth to liberate through his ministry. He was teaching the church how to see those they did not want to see, and unfortunately women were included within such groupings. For Oduyoye, to learn Christ is to inherently center women’s voices and experiences as critical theological content. Women’s perspective contains liberative perspective for African Theology and Christology as a whole. Theology is misguided without their hermeneutical direction – for the church to know and hear from Christ, the church must know and listen to women as well.
Chapter five takes a look at Oduyoye’s theological anthropology as it relates to traditional Akan (Ghanaian, West African) conceptions of God, the self, and others. It argues that in order for humanity to understand itself, it must understand its Creator. The problem is that anthropological conceptions that privilege some over others already guides theological thought for many within the Christian church, positioning divine epistemology as incorrect and incomplete – positioning it as Euro-centric or as patriarchal and paternal. The assertions about human relationality and the origin accounts of such must tend to divine intentionality.

How God intended humanity to emerge from shared relationality towards God and from this patterns of relating towards the self and others develop. To derive human relationships according to divisions such as class, gender, race, culture, or ethnicity presents a rudimentary hermeneutical error. It misses the point of humanity’s created nature. Oduyoye’s theological anthropology presents the opportunity to do theology in the inverse, to know God in learning ourselves.

Chapter six wrestles deeply with whom the church is comprised of and thus who the church belongs to. For Oduyoye, recounting the effects of missional Christianity on Africans is in line with her centering African voices to construct what a holistic ecclesial vision looks like. It is not solely steeped in European conceptions of the truth or of the divine, but in African views as well. For Oduyoye, a Christian ecclesiology must consider not only marginalized Christian voices on the global scale, but also non-
Christian voices. These groups consist of peoples examining God-nature and Christ-presence as well through their own respective religious practices. They must at least be part of the conversation of what God’s creation might look like in the world today.

As “exterior” faith practices must be considered in Christian theological conception, so, too, must women’s voices. Oduyoye goes so far as to claim that the church is not the church if it does not normalize its women and their experiences as a part of it. Women are not a sector of the church, but women are church as well. Women are that which comprises Christ’s ministry in the world. If the church fails to grasp this reality in favor of an ecclesial representation informed by oppression and domination, it fails to represent Christ. It fails to direct attention to God but witnesses to a tradition of malice masking itself as the theological.

Word and witness work together, they even apprise each other. It is within the words of theological advocates that God is witnessed to. If mistreated, both hold no righteous power, but summon detrimental ideology and inform malicious religious practice of a different sort.

Within Oduyoye’s work, words and witness are two important conceptual genres of theology that implicate the creating-action of the divine and the divine possibilities of human relational practice.
**Storied Theologies**

What messages are our stories sending?

The synthesis of words and the subsequent consequence of meaning-making can beget story. Stories carry within them a means to relate to and comprehend the vicissitudes of living. We understand ourselves through stories; life begins with a story, with words. Story accounts for that from whence we came and towards what we are moving.

The Christian story proves this as the Hebraic faith-tradition anchored in text, account, and narrations tell a story of the foundation of divinity, and in light of this, or better-yet, because of this, human being. The notion of life and existence is predicated on tellings, on how one’s origins are re-created through the synthesis of words and meanings.

Stories birth something, whether reality, perception, wisdom, or love. Through the joining of words and the worlds behind them, something is given, and in the exchange, life is witnessed.

What we have been told influences how we imagine ourselves to be; it impacts the trajectory of what we become. It also determines the shape of our lives. These words that carry meaning beyond itself translate the particulars of life.

Oduyoye’s story and theological efforts demonstrate her witness to reveal a thoughtful and thought-provoking God, a God who loves all of God’s creation and has

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good intention for the world, but most of all a God who is interested in the liveliness and well-being of God’s creation. The dilemmas and issues we run into come in humanity’s inability to grasp and to subsequently attest to this. In learning about this God who Oduyoye’s work reveals to us, we understand how and who we are in relation, we gain a clearer picture of the salvific work of God enfleshed, we learn to see each other rightly, and we understand the purpose of the body of Christ in the world. In all of this, we understand better and learn how to properly see and receive African women for the theological witnesses and exemplars of justice that they are. If we see African women rightly, we are on task to see and know ourselves in the same manner. When we see and know each other well, we are standing on secure theological ground.
Chapter One | Mercy Amba Oduyoye

A mother of many and one that carries her own head: that is me in the future.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

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Introduction

In a theological world that has recognized women as interlocutors only as of late, the insight women offer will be critical to theology’s future and well being; and this reality has global reach. Women’s theological standpoints come not only from the West but they can, and often do, come from women from all over the world. African women’s theology is one of these standpoints. Its strongest advocate and founder is Ghanaian feminist, systematic, postcolonial, and liberationist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. She has worked to grant African women’s theological voices a platform, proper recognition, and equal consideration in Christian theology.

Mercy Oduyoye overturns African women’s perceived theological absence by re-claiming both their voice and their power. She insists, “The strength of a woman is in her tongue.”¹ Her work illustrates that African women’s presence and contribution are both necessary to and present within Christian theology, issuing forth its own declaration of métier.

¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 88. The quote she references as in alignment with describing African women’s strength is from Abraham Cohen’s Ancient Jewish Proverbs.
In order to comprehend Oduyoye’s theological message, we must first know and understand the events of her life and her formation within it. Through her theological work, she informs the Christian church and its hermeneutical strands that it needs voices like hers. She shows the church where Christian practice has been violent towards African women and suggests what it needs to do to remedy such problematic action.

A relevant voice since the 1960s and one of the first African women theologians to make her way onto the African and then international theological scene, Mercy Oduyoye urges the Christian church in Africa as well as globally to treat issues of race, gender, class, culture, and religious pluralism seriously, while also drawing attention to why they remain issues. Her Christian theological work overall addresses five areas of concern: 1) “fundamentalistic anti-women usages of the Bible”; 2) “the rereading of the Biblical and historical texts with a focus towards their cultural biases” or “the refinement of cultural hermeneutics”; 3) “the enhancement of theological education and ministerial formation amongst women”; 4) “the retrieving of women’s stories on their involvement in church and society”; and, 5) “the instigation of cross-gender discussions.”

The Bible and its interpretive view of women, cultural hermeneutics, women’s theological opportunity and enhancement within the church and the world at large, and a total communal response to theological blind spots comprise the heart of Oduyoye’s

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informative and liberative work. Her work not only pushes for African women’s recognition but the transformation of all persons of the Christian church.

Her aim is to offer a corrective to theological positions that rarely privilege voices like her own. African feminist scholar, Isabel Phiri asserts that Oduyoye has contributed immensely in “the area of theology, the study of religion and culture, missiology…” She is an esteemed contributor in the field. Over the course of her ecclesial and academic career Oduyoye has focused on a number of concerns including, “the rewriting of African religious history, the need for ecumenism, and the empowerment of women.” Her impact is universal and applies to all Christian discourse, not only the African or feminist articulations of it. Her work creates space in which women can contribute to the fullness of African theological perspective and theological thought as a whole, and it does so by countering gendered notions of vocality.

Within this chapter, I explore the trajectory of Mercy Oduyoye’s life in order to foreground examination of her theological work and conclusions. I examine how Ghanaian history, her cultural identity, familial life, educational formation, and her ecumenical involvement helped form her theological perspective towards the empowerment of African women. All aspects of her identity are relevant: her encounters with race and gender within and outside of her Akan culture are pivotal in this journey,

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her upbringing under the Nkrumah regime emboldened her love for and access to education, her educational path illumines the fight for women to be taken seriously as theologically credible voices, and her ecumenical interests attest to her intersectional identity as African, woman, and Christian.

Oduyoye is not one to shy away from how culture creates religious posture; instead, she welcomes these truths. Her standpoint can be traced through the story of her people, the shape of her historical and theological vision, the contours of her feminism, and the rootedness of her African identity. For her, it is in addressing the truth of where tradition and culture come from that theological and ethical work can be done most faithfully. Her work moves towards the fuller and global theological inclusion of women. Thus, in this chapter, I follow the gradual development of Oduyoye’s bold Christian response of inclusion from her home and familial life, to the custom of her Akan feminist articulation and the scope of her educational journey towards her embodying leadership roles that highlight the intellectual and ministerial global force that she is. Mercy Oduyoye’s life trajectory is one the Christian world would do well to pay attention to to understand this articulation of its voice most impactful towards ensuring that justice and prophetic witness be present in religious matters.

We gain the most clarity around the shape of her theological voice once we recognize the backstory of this African woman from southeastern Ghana. Her voice
arose at a critical time, and it would arise, in part, because of the shifts in Ghana’s governmental systems.

**Ghana’s Political Climate**

Like many other pre-colonial West African societies, Ghana functioned in tribal systems of governance. Tribal life, political scientist and sociologist David Apter describes, was an organized system of relationship and governance. Members within tribes operated under certain beliefs around how to relate to one another. This blueprint of relationship was often modeled through the home. Tribal life “…represented, in Africa, a way of life in which certain kinds of relationships – the family, the lineage, or the clan – formed the bedrock of significant social interactions.”5 One’s tribal beliefs and rhythms constituted personal, familial, and social identity.

European modes of political life, introduced through colonial initiatives, would alter this tradition of relationship. Their redefining of political structures within West African societies led to Africans practicing less self-government in the ways they were once accustomed. To be certain, Africa was not a monolithic place; its people lived and moved as particular to their context, but a reality that many Africans had in common was the impact of European rule in African social life. Apter describes the domino effect of European political impact as one where “…a gradual redefinition of social life is occurring throughout the continent. What happens in one area has its repercussion in

others. People are less bewildered and less passive to European rule.” Europeans brought certain benefits such certain educational institutions such as the Achimota School in Ghana, but even assets like these had their liabilities. Endeavors like the Achimota School were founded upon forgetting the tradition and life of the people who once lived in the area on which it was built. It erased history and served as “the colonial government’s attempt to compete with religious denominations in providing a first class educational institution for its colonial subjects.” The Achimota School, though a progressive example, had its own marred history. Educational institutions, though providing great benefit, would, in the long run, be a source of harm and erasure.

With the spread of colonial ambition, tribal life in Africa would take a backseat to new modes of rule. Apter describes in detail the shift in which Africans, in being taught a new mode of governance, would adopt the governmental attitude of its colonizers. He explains:


Political scientist Jon Kraus does not see the correlation quite this way. He claims, “While there is a respectable range of sociological/anthropological studies available on traditional systems in Ghana, it has often been difficult to derive accurately the relationship political systems to modern political change.” He is unconvinced that Ghanaian attitudes towards particular modes of authority changed significantly enough to accede to colonial systems of rule. Something else was at play in the transition of governmental approaches.


Busia informs that “Achimota” loosely means, “We do not mention people” in the language of the Gã peoples, who had a spiritual affiliation with the land on which the school was first built in the early twentieth-century. The name invokes the idea that those who had lived there before are forgetting and forgotten, and that people today are walk in this. She recounts, “We too have been taught forgetting. We are schooled in another language now and names lose their meanings, except as labels.”
Authority patterns the West had established in Africa have succeeded in bringing forth new images as well as new gods. These new images increasingly reflect concern by African groups for greater freedom of action. Political autonomy has become an insistent theme. As the desire for autonomy sharpens, two great cultural traditions clash with one another. One points to the past, when tribal freedom represented a period of dignity and independence within the traditional pattern of life. The other points to a national future: instead of the tribe, the state; instead of the colonial administrator, the African politician; instead of the mission school, public secular education; instead of colonial status, parliamentary democracies.

These political institutions would capture the imagination of some Ghanaians towards ulterior ends. Political scientist David Kimble asserts economic development as a creative force by which the “individualist, competitive, acquisitive attitudes and values of the West were introduced into African society.” He reminds us that “The early European traders brought new means to wealth and power: their guns and gunpowder profoundly altered the balance of power among the coastal States with which they came in contact...” In many respects this notion of power acquisition would lead African men to seek power, but towards the liberation of their people. Though colonial governance was felt continentally, our focus will be on Ghana and one of its most popular leaders towards their own and Africa’s independence efforts, in order to illumine what impact seeking and maintaining liberation would have upon Ghana’s people, and especially its women.

9 Ibid.
A detriment and benefit of colonial contact was its ability to shift and determine forcefully, directly, and immediately, social order and its maintenance. Ghanaians, attentive to European modes of governance and ambition, soon began to seek political power as well. As a result, the formation of Ghanaian national political parties, mainly led by men, came to the fore; they would emerge with the intention of removing colonial influence so that Ghana could function independently.

These leaders would react against colonialism and racism in hopes of reclaiming their autonomy and self-governance. Various voices and ideologues would arise, but one would emerge from the field as most influential. A crucial figure and vocal advocate of Ghana’s liberative effort was Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the Convention’s People Party (CPP), the first Prime Minister of Ghana, and Ghana’s eventual first president. His appeal was his inclusiveness. He extended a unifying message of strength and solidarity in Ghana as well as across Africa. Many in Ghana assumed his and others’ liberative efforts to be God’s will and intention.¹⁰

Nkrumah sought the affirmation of Ghana’s global greatness. In his presidential acceptance speech after Ghana gained independence, he stated, “...my last warning to you is that you are to stand firm behind us, so that we can prove to the world, that when

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the African is given chance, he can show to the world that he is somebody!”⁰¹ He claimed a new Africa in the world, an Africa “ready to fight his own battle, and show that after all, the black man is capable of managing his own affairs.”⁰²

Political action would be the means for this God-ordained change to come about. The Christianity brought to Ghana would soon become the impetus for resistance against colonizers. The political and social awakening in Ghana carried a tone of deliverance and redemption, much like the themes of liberation of the people of Israel. Nkrumah claimed, “…nothing in the world can be done, unless it has the support of God.”⁰³ Ghana would need its own exodus event. And the person who would bring Ghana out from under colonial rule, Nkrumah, was considered an agent in God’s liberating action. Recognized as God-sent, Nkrumah saw the suffering of God’s people and was, for the most part, given the good faith and permission of the people to lead Ghana out from under oppressive rule.

The “prince of African nationalism” fused Ghana’s liberative claims with religious invocation: the inscription on his statue read, “Seek you first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added to you.”⁰⁴ The message was that of the

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⁰² Ibid, 302.
⁰³ Ibid.
strengthening of political influence to be utilized for and towards African progress – under God.

Nkrumah’s platform urged Ghanaians to govern themselves as “foreign rule was overthrown in order to enable Africans to build up a new society.” Historian Ousman Kobo patterns Ghana’s political transition this way,

The Gold Coast's political landscape was changing rapidly between 1948 and 1956. As the colony, now united with the Northern Territories, moved closer to independence, regional identities began to shape political configurations and identities of newly founded political parties. The National Liberation Movement and its predecessor, the United Gold Coast Convention, came to be dominated by Ashanti people, while the Northern People’s Party (NPP) derived support primarily from the north. Only Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party (CPP) transcended regional affiliations and drew significant support from all regions.

On March 6th, 1957, Ghana - the country formerly known as the Gold Coast - would gain its independence from Great Britain and join other African nations in organizations such as the Organization of African Unity “in order to break the monopoly and dominance of the North Atlantic in political and economic affairs of the world.” Nkrumah decision to “form his own party to agitate for independence” helped give rise to a new political culture. One thing he did was especially unheard of: he

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incorporated women into government through the parliament. This strategy was intentional; he seized upon the political potential of the country and established a totalitarian regime towards socialist and emancipatory ends by unconventional means.

And he included women in this vision toward Ghana’s prosperity.

His impact was felt because his policies aimed to reach many. Ghana’s empowerment led to a surge in new initiatives and inclusive measures. African studies expert, Takyiwaa Manuh shows us that “Indeed, the CPP and Nkrumah introduced a new paradigm in the Gold Coast politics when they implemented strategies to involve the youth, the grassroots, and women in mainstream politics.”

The pattern, however, was telling of the complex dynamics of gender in Ghana - a man ruled over the country in which some of his fiercest supporters were its women. Nkrumah saw and incorporated women into the political vision of Ghana’s emancipation, but his initiatives could only reach so far. It remained to be seen if the radical action of one man could change cultural perceptions of women for good.

Women supported Nkrumah’s campaign and message because it appeared to have made space for them. They were interested in being a part of the de-colonial educated elite, who often felt left out of Nkrumah’s efforts, “banded together to form…the Danquah-Busia tradition, a noteworthy counterbalance to Nkrumah’s populist and inclusive politics.”


struggle and sought “self-government now.” They held positions in the party, recruited members to the Conventional People’s Party, and sponsored rallies; they did so “…inasmuch as independence sought to end colonial domination and create better conditions of life for the population in the form of more schools and hospitals, better drinking water and greater access to all of these amenities.” Manuh reminds us that women had the most to gain from independence, and Nkrumah was willing to help them get it. He sought to “raise the status of African Womanhood.”

In 1960 the National Council of Ghana Women came into being from the merger of the politically charged Ghana Women’s League and the more politically neutral National Federation of Gold Coast Women. The National Council of Ghana Women intended to become “an internal wing of the CPP.” These women, many being market-women, provided support and enthusiasm for Nkrumah’s governance. He pushed them to empower themselves as he declared them part of the fight and resistance. Their fight and involvement was deemed their mission in order to create a better life for their children. This meant that women were expected to “work hand in hand militantly with their men to end colonialism and imperialism.”

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21 Ibid, 286.
22 Ibid, 286-287.
23 Ibid, 288.
24 Ibid, 290.
Perhaps the greatest measure felt was Nkrumah’s focus on providing educational opportunities to all, especially to girls. Schools and universities received girls and women at record rates. Women’s training colleges were opened. By the end of Nkrumah’s administration, many women had professional and governmental positions. Women’s empowerment to work under and alongside Ghanaian men would make a lasting impression on how women would perceive themselves and their efficacy.

However, though his efforts propelled Ghana into social, political and economic change and mobilized many Africans continentally and globally, Nkrumah was overthrown on February 24, 1966. His reign appeared too unstable and totalitarian for some. Ghana would undergo multiple shifts in government until civilian rule took root in the early 1990s. Nkrumah’s impact on women would be tremendous and long-standing, but his support for women would not be enough to overturn the patriarchal barriers still

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26 Ibid, 289.

Konadu and Campbell fill in the timeline of Ghana’s rule from 1966 to the present. Military coups from the National Liberation Council (military and police forces) overthrew Nkrumah’s government ruling until 1969 when the civilian government would be restored. In 1972, the National Redemption Council (made of police and military as well) took control. They ruled from 1975 to 1979 under the new name, the Supreme Military Council. The Armed Forced Revolutionary Council would overtake them in 1979. They returned the government to civilians. The 1981 military coup of the Provisional National Defense Council would give them control until 1992. From 1992 to the present “the country has enjoyed a stable period of civilian democratic rule.”
present to many women within their own cultures. Women would still have to wrestle with the ills of colonialism alongside of the patriarchal traditions of their cultures and country. Their world would still primarily be, a man’s world. The contradictory messages of empowerment and gender hierarchy would color the story of many Ghanaian women.

However, some women would not succumb to this incongruity. One such woman is the focus of this work. A bold theological voice would emerge in the midst of this complex reality - the voice of an Akan woman born into a powerful class of self-assured women and to a preaching father. Her voice would consistently insist on men and women’s equality in a culture that spoke to but could not properly demonstrate its values of communal care and wholeness towards its own women. Her voice would provide a much-needed challenge to a history of inclusion and harmful practices of exclusion. This much-needed theological voice would, further, assert the full value of all persons, not solely those whom the Christian church chose to acknowledge or recognize.

As we recall, African women were deeply impacted by and greatly benefited from President Nkrumah’s rule. He lit a fire of indignation in the people and proved Ghanaian women valuable to social and political change. It would be this wave of

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28 I make this assessment precisely because of Nkrumah’s actions seeming revolutionary. Women in politics and in government seemed an anomaly. His radical moves of inclusion denote social configurations that did not operate with measures of equality many came to affiliate with his regime. Yet, Nkrumah’s language of Africa’s triumph still holds traces of the patriarchy’s hold in Ghanaian culture. The self-governing man or men’s ability to prove himself to the world seem to evidence a logic that prioritized Ghanaian men (despite the fanatical political support of many Ghanaian women, as Manuh reminds us).
empowerment that Mercy Oduyoye would be raised within. Under his regime Oduyoye would learn that the message of liberation belonged to African women as much as it belonged to African men. Within this moment in history Oduyoye embraced educational opportunity and clashed with the patriarchal logic still present within her culture and within the Christian faith. Oduyoye, much like the women of the CPP, advocated the well being of all, but would still run up against both colonial and preservationist attitudes and beliefs from her own people. This intersection is the place in which we are introduced to Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

**Familial Life**

On October 21, 1933 in the middle of the cocoa harvest Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye was born to Mercy Yaa Dakwa Yamoah and Minister Charles Kwaw Yamoah.29 The farm, located in Amoanna near Asamankese, Ghana, belonged to her paternal grandfather, Kodwo Ewudzi Yamoah after whom she was named on the eighth day, as is Akan custom. She was baptized in April 1934.30

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The accounts of Mercy Oduyoye’s birth are multiple. Some, such as religious scholar Bartholomew Chidili claim her birth to be October 1934, whereas others such as South African theological research director Christina Landman offers October 1933 as accurate. I went with Landman’s account for two reasons: First she names that in speaking personally with Oduyoye, the birth date was clarified as October 1933, and secondly, in Beads and Strands Oduyoye speaks of her baptism in April 1934 as a baby. This would corroborate the 1933 date as the most accurate.

30 Ibid, xi.
On that day in October Mercy Yaa did not know if she or her baby would survive the birth, but their resilience carried baby Mercy’s life forth and spared Mercy Yaa’s life. Though unsure why they survived, Oduyoye recounts, she is sure of how they survived: the will of her mother, an incredibly strong woman. Oduyoye firmly believes that African women hold great power, power so strong it can change the course of life on the continent. Strong women can shift the tides of the world they lived in. Oduyoye learned this from the women in her life and took this idea to heart. Though she would never meet her maternal grandmother, Yaa Dakwaa who she passed when her mother was still a baby, much of what she learned about her oral culture and women’s voices she would receive from her paternal grandmother, Mrs. Martha Aba Awotwiwa Yamoah or Maame Awotwiwa, her mother, Mercy Yaa, and from the stories of the women who came before them. Oduyoye learned early on that strength is the ontological foundation of African women. This would carry over into her consideration and practice of the Christian faith.

Oduyoye’s father was a Methodist pastor and theological educator who served in multiple parishes. She recounts that growing up she lived in as many as four or five

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different locations and in mission houses.\textsuperscript{34} This exposed Oduyoye to different groups within the Akan people strengthening her appreciation for Ghanaian culture and heritage.\textsuperscript{35} Though her father believed in gender equality and it was never an expressed issue in their household, Oduyoye remembers that her mother “entered completely” into her husband’s life.\textsuperscript{36} Mercy Yaa, too, served the Methodist church faithfully, but often with less recognition than the men, whether they were European or African. She, and other women who served in similar capacities, knew that “Westernization was teaching Africa the advantage of keeping women invisible.”\textsuperscript{37} Christianity was not a salve for some of the African women of Oduyoye’s mother’s generation, but often a foe to be wary of yet kept close.

Oduyoye, then, attributes her perspective to her mother’s strength and experiences and her father’s dedication to the faith. She understands the nuance of being both an Akan woman and a Christian. Her religious upbringing, educational and ministerial opportunities, and cultural reflections and advocacy on behalf of African


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 37, 45-46 & 159. Interestingly enough, Oduyoye described her mother’s ecclesial involvement as an attempt to Westernize in order to become liberated from African sexism. The reveals the dual struggle against Western patriarchy and African patriarchy many African women struggled and worked against.
women constitute the core of her passions for this very reason. Oduyoye’s understanding of Akan women’s potential sheds light on how her interests emerged.

Oduyoye constantly questions what makes one a woman. In Akan culture, being a woman is often aligned with marriage and subsequently the role of motherhood, which can be understood as beneficial within either a matrilineal or patrilineal-focused culture. In the matrilineal Akan culture the bloodline of each person is traced to one’s mother. In this line of thinking, a child “belongs to the mother.”38 Women, then, are crucial to the continuation of the Akan lineage and legacy. But, often, Akan women are tasked to fill this cultural expectation with little say in how this notion will socially affect them – this is its patriarchal manifestation. Oduyoye lived in the cultural tension of being expected to have children (as her grandmother espoused) without first learning how to stand on her own feet (what her mother urged her to first secure).39 In being important to the continuation of the Akan community, but having little power within these social systems, Akan women were placed into a dichotomy that reinforced the patriarchal sentiment that feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether describes. In men “needing” women for the continuation of the people but denying their leadership in the decision-making matters of their communities, “an underlying assumption that women

are both powerful and dangerous” was at work.⁴⁰ Oduyoye’s life trajectory would be routed through her response to this reality. Over the course of her life she was afforded opportunity in some spaces and denied it in others.

Growing up surrounded by eight siblings -- five sisters and three brothers -- Oduyoye felt that she had equal opportunity within the home and towards pursuing her intellectual interests. She recalls that she never felt treated differently because of her gender or her place in the family as the first-born girl (on whom pseudo-maternal responsibilities would typically have fallen). Her parents did not create a gender divide in the educational opportunities afforded her and her siblings. Most of the Yamoah children obtained a university-level education.⁴¹ Education was a very foundational aspect of her familial life and construction of their futures.⁴² It was that which would provide opportunity for the lives they wanted. And knowing this, Oduyoye took advantaging of steering the ship of her own life.

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Oduyoye’s story of educational success is an anomaly. Her level of success and access was not common for most women. Education was not available to Ghanaian women as it could have been, though there was an education explosion of the later 1950s Oduyoye notes. Economic disparity caused division between the rich and decision-making north and the poorer southern region of Ghana. Women were included in education reform, but their involvement was considered “informal” and their progress outside of literacy, was little. The future for women with education was not as promising as pledged to be.
For Oduyoye, her identity as an Akan woman and her Christianity faith served as the soil in which her identity work would take root. She adjoined her cultural and religious identity, keeping her culture primary. She knew herself as an Akan woman, first. The women in her life impressed on her that her identity as an Akan woman was deserving of respect and equal treatment within Akan culture and within the Christian faith. She, thus, considers herself an Akan Christian in that sequence.43

**A Childhood Memory**

Oduyoye’s background, especially her mother’s view of Akan womanhood, contributed to her holding relationship to her Christian existence and cultural formation in healthy and necessary tension. But it was not Oduyoye’s mother alone who played a role in determining her voice; her father’s choices and convictions also had a deep influence on her formation and ultimately played a large role in her choosing theology as a career path.

Oduyoye became a theologian and theological educator in large part because of her father. Though women were limited to the few career choices of becoming nurses, secretaries, or teachers at the time, she listened to her father’s advice for her to pursue

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teaching—a talent that proved helpful to her in the future. He recognized her potential and she excelled, taking it further than many thought she would.

Oduyoye’s father’s dedication to the United Methodist Church proved formational to Oduyoye’s ecclesial perspective and shaped her approach to how and where culture and tradition intersected. It was deeply influential in her understanding of the role of the Christian church in the lives of Africans. Her paternal grandparents, who were Methodist, passed this tradition on to her father and her father passed this on to her.45 The Methodist church was central to her life.

One of her earliest and most memorable moments with the church came during a Palm Sunday at a relatively young age. Oduyoye, not quite twelve years old, was tasked to read the Gospel scripture reading in her native tongue, Mfantse (an local Akan dialect spoken in her home).46 She succeeded in doing so, but was less interested in the religious meaning of the moment; she was most interested in the details foregrounding it. I want to draw attention to how this instance of recitation informs her relationship to the church. I suggest that this recital moment is etched into her memory not because of its spiritual significance, but because of the role that word, the repetition of word in form, and the repetition of her father’s word-form in particular, had fixed into her

46 Ibid.
consciousness. She recalls the minutiae of this moment: she rehearsed the scripture relentlessly, with “the right pauses and intonation” so that she could say it, “exactly as Papa would have read it.”

I flag this as a salient moment in Oduyoye’s theological interest. We must pay attention to how and why one of Oduyoye’s first memorable instances of her direct church involvement is interwoven with her father’s expectation. It seems that a complex weaving of African gendered identity and Christian commitments converge in this instant. The force of her tongue is pressured to mimic and diction maleness, an African Christian maleness at that which is, in itself, a mimicry of European Christian maleness. The complexities are obvious: can an African woman achieve such a feat? Questions of whose Christianity, whose tradition, arise. What manner of Akan womanhood is this that it aims to mimic a maleness that cannot be copied? What configured itself into Oduyoye’s memory when performance and sacred event converged at the site of her father?

The question of the impact of her father’s image and what is means for her Akan Christian womanhood, interests me. Her performing Christianity in such a way can be

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47 Ibid.
48 I want to name that Oduyoye did not read this as a negative moment. I offer this analytical observation to offer a genealogy of her Christian tongue. This training and formation would soon found its own intonation and arc of pronunciation and announce spiritual objectives most in line with honoring African women of the Christian faith instead of asserting they “sound like their male counterparts.”
viewed in a number of ways. Did her father want her to perfect and thus honor her mother tongue, or was there aspiration to perfection of a different sort? Was the repetition of word and form an ode to her father’s performance of Christian performance? What was being perfected in Oduyoye’s word and witness? Did this performance exceed her father, her grandfather, and reach back into something more ancient? During this moment of recollection and remembrance, what did Oduyoye’s memorization mean to the convergence of colonialism, Christianity, and Ghanaian culture? And where did Ghanaian womanhood fit in with everything? Could women be lost between the intonations of their own mother-tongue or was this a moment for them to gain their own “pronunciation”? 

I seems that the Christian performance of faith meant something to Oduyoye in that moment, at least enough to be one of her earliest memories of it. Christian practice expressed in this way bore something deep within itself that awakened for Oduyoye a fascination towards the modes of discipleship actively occurring within it. Her educational journey would lead her back to these questions about the Christian faith and where women fit in.

**Educational Trajectory**

Mercy Oduyoye has made the most of her academic career. In her lifetime she has had many visiting lectureships in Europe and the United States in numerous institutions including the Henry Luce Visiting professorship at Union Theological
Seminary in New York from 1986 to 1987, a visiting lectureship/research position at Harvard Divinity School from 1985 to 1986, a visiting position in Princeton Theological Seminary, and a visiting scholar position at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Overall, Oduyoye has been awarded ten doctorates: in September 1990, from the Academy of the Ecumenical Indian Theology, in January of 1991 from the University of Amsterdam, in 2002, from the University of Western Cape, in 2008 from Yale University, as well as from institutions such as Chicago Theological Seminary, Stellenbosch, and the University of the Free State. All of these honors are either DDs or DTh degrees. One Ghanaian theological institution has awarded her both the DD and the DTh.\textsuperscript{50}

Oduyoye’s education was a key component towards the trajectory of her intellectual, ecclesial, and social interests. It served as the foundation from which her ecumenical interests would take root and emerge as critical to her theological worldview and practice. In her education path, we can identify patterns of her evolution and growth; it is clear that her educational and ecumenical experiences shape the direction of her future interest and vocational call.

At a young age, while in school, Oduyoye thought about her peers who did not have financial stability or who struggled with succeeding within the educational system.

brought to Ghana. She reflected deeply on opportunity and later learned to recognize how and where education was a cornerstone of governmental tension. Overall, the political revolution in Ghana caught the attention of students, many of which saw the issues present as traceable to authority. They resisted the inability to name their own futures. They “demanded to know why they should not be involved in the processes that determined their lives and shaped the world.” Students wanted to be in charge of their educational and life paths. Oduyoye’s self-determination within her own education would prove critical to where life would take her.

Oduyoye’s formal education occurred in Methodist schools. She recalls that she was educated in the most elite schools. She began at a Methodist primary school run in an old mission house. She then attended a pre-secondary Methodist school in Mmofraturo, Kumasi. It was there that she learned the best of Ashanti culture (of which Akan culture is a part) as it was incorporated into the curriculum of the school. She later attended a Methodist Girls Boarding School and had her secondary education at Achimota School where she finished in 1952. At Achimota they stressed educational excellence and even offered students the opportunity to learn the native Gà language. Oduyoye notes how “a broad perspective of Ghanaian culture grounded the

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51 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), xii.
Religious educator, Yolanda Smith details how Oduyoye’s time at Achimota School influenced her worldview and introduced her to the Christian values that took the thriving of both men and women seriously. It taught her that people of different backgrounds could live in harmony.55

Oduyoye wrestled with her career choices but ultimately decided to pursue teaching. At the prompting of her father “she attended the Teacher’s Training College at Kumasi College of Technology (now the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) in Kumasi” from 1953 to 1954.56 After completing her Post-Secondary Certificate of Education (Teachers Certificate A, Ministry of Education, Ghana), she taught at Asawase Methodist Girls’ Middle School from 1954-1959 near Kumasi.57 For her undergraduate education, she attended the University of Ghana, Legon in 1959 receiving her bachelor’s degree in 1963 as well as receiving the Intermediate Bachelor of Divinity from the Theology Department of the University of London in 1961.58

During this time, her interest in theology was growing. Instead of pursuing studies in geography and economics, as anticipated, she was encouraged to study theology by her Church History professor from the University of Ghana, Noel Q. King. Not only was her interested piqued, but her sense of the mission of the global church was also taking shape. Oduyoye had a desire to be ministerially involved with her community during her matriculation. She took to ministerial leadership positions while a student, heading the University Christian Fellowship. Motivated to understand Christian theology further, she studied for the Tripos Part III (a one year master’s program in the Cambridge educational system) in dogmatics at the University of Cambridge. She graduated with her bachelors in 1964.

After graduating from Cambridge in 1964, Oduyoye taught religious studies at Wesley Girls’ High School in Cape Coast, Ghana in 1965. She reflects that it had been a challenge, yet quite edifying as she thought through and addressed issues concerning “…the education of girls, teenage pregnancy, early marriages, rumours of abortions and occasional drop-outs for no apparent reason.” She found herself asking, “What was the purpose of education? Was the Church doing it any differently from the government?”

She later received another B.A. in theology in 1965 from Cambridge University\textsuperscript{62} and eventually a Master of Arts degree, in Christian theology at Cambridge University in 1969.\textsuperscript{63}

It is clear that, in addition to its rootedness in her home and within her family,\textsuperscript{64} some of Oduyoye’s foundational cultural knowledge and pride was nurtured within the educational structures she moved through in her lifetime. The education systems served as a means and space to esteem Ghanaian culture. Yet, though she felt affirmed by her educational experience “she eventually felt discrimination both from her own Akan culture and from the Christian church.”\textsuperscript{65} Though education provided opportunity, the larger problems embedded within “…African culture, Islamic norms, Western civilization, and the church’s traditional antifeminism piled on African women”\textsuperscript{66} and affected the scope of her career. Oduyoye’s work would be the place from which she answered back against such forces.

Ghana’s political shifts also had an impact on Oduyoye’s educational path. As part of the government-initiated developmental efforts under the Nkrumah regime,\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{62} Ibid.
\bibitem{64} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “God Alone Gives and Distributes Gifts,” from \textit{Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women’s Spiritual Writings} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 454.
\bibitem{65} Ibid.
\bibitem{66} Ibid, 455.
\end{thebibliography}
Odúyoye was chosen to study at Cambridge. She recalls how the regime’s focus on education training provided opportunity for her continued educational pursuits:

The Kwame Nkrumah government [Prime Minister and later President of Ghana from 1952 to 1966] was so focused on education, a lot of us got our secondary education more or less for free. Nkrumah always insisted that


Dr. Kwame Nkrumah was a political figure and Ghana’s first president known best as being one of the “Big Six” of the United Gold Coast Convention the first political party of the liberation-wanting Gold Coast (and Ghana as a whole). He was known for his dedication to Pan-Africanism so much so that “people of African descent around the world were ecstatic about this beacon of ‘black pride’.” He formed the first African government in Ghana when the Convention People’s political party, a party helped form, won the February 1951 election. His impact was felt years prior to the official liberation and independence of Ghana; he created a foundation from which Ghana’s voice and liberation would emerge. He attended to the interests of the Ghanaian people and served as a voice that actually matched the residents rather than the rule of colonial powers determining the interests and impacting the welfare of the people. There is something to be said of the force of political unrest and the desire for autonomy. In 1960 Ghana officially became a one party state under Nkrumah. He desire to free Ghana of colonial rule came to pass. It is argued whether the party had socialist or communist leanings; it claimed itself as socialist promoting what was called “Nkrumahism, a form of socialism with African characterics paralleling Mao's socialism with Chinese characteristics.” (Apter, 17).

Nkrumah’s desire for the liberation of the African continent as a whole spoke to his thirst for power. All countries would only follow Ghana’s model of liberation as Ghana was the first to secure their emancipation in this way. Thus, Nkrumah’s desire to expand his influence and rule became his downfall as multiple other parties came into power by coup and election (even though the CPP remained and tried to make a resurgence). Apter details Nkrumah’s political desires this way: “The rationale for all of this supposed that, as a state, Ghana was being organized for the next phase, that is, the elimination of imperialism from the sub-Saharan continent and the establishment of African unity. But the latter proved to be a rather ephemeral goal: as other countries did become independent in rapid succession, they preferred to follow their own, more local, political inclinations. Still, this did not prevent Nkrumah from trying to become the primary pan-African leader.” (18)

Apter does, however, attribute Ghana’s independence to the vision and movement of Nkrumah, “Ghana’s independence had a larger significance in that it represented a moral moment, a historic break, a rupture in the colonial scheme of things, and a new departure. It was an event that placed Africa, at least for a time, as a player on the world stage. It is in recognition of this fact that, more than any other political leader, Nkrumah is remembered and celebrated for his accomplishments as the founder of Ghana - not for what followed.” (21)
Ghana’s independence meant nothing if the rest of Africa was not independent.\textsuperscript{68}

The impetus behind the education boom was that it would strengthen Ghana’s continental and global influence. It would prove Ghana’s self-managing ability and demonstrate its reach for the educational betterment of the continent as a whole.

Oduyoye’s educational allowance was a Pan-African effort. She recalls that Nkrumah offered free educational opportunities if the recipients taught anywhere on the African continent. She would take advantage of this offer pursuing a few short teaching stints in Nigeria.

The independence of Ghana played a nominal role in the trajectory of Oduyoye’s life-path and career choice.\textsuperscript{69} The message of resisting oppressive control was


Nkrumah’s emphasis on uniting as a people is critical as a unifying point due to the traditional notions and importance of kinship systems. The emphasis in this case then positions and unifies the people of Ghana over and against the British. In other words, this national connection that Nkrumah was able to build force and power behind is connected to Ghanaian-centered, democratic, understandings of relationality anchored in cultural forces such as kinship.

Former Prime Minister of Ghana, Professor and sociology and culture and Nkrumah opposer, Kofi Abrefa Busia offers a thorough explanation of kinships tracing how what kinships mean to Africans determine how governmental power would emerge, be organized and how it would be “seen.” The notion of democracy was a radically different governmental system than the traditional political systems “developed in the context of communities which were families, of extensions of families, or tribes.” Political management was offered through particular kinship systems and communal formation (that Busia argues occurred in isolation due to poor communications) which created means for particular local traditions. Economic and political means were addressed through these group practices. Social order was maintained through these kinship systems. Kinship, then, is more akin to something like citizenship than territory. Different peoples, different kin, live in particular areas – though the separation is small, the emphasis on kinship as most important to Africans is important to note. The concept of nation, or nation-building doesn’t register with Africans as much as kinship systems do as a primary means of identity and place from which to construct social, economic and political systems.
culminating during a pivotal moment in Oduyoye’s planning of her own future. She was receiving cues from the times: Ghana’s recognition of women as purposeful towards liberative political action should have been translatable on a larger scale, especially concerning Christian discourses and initiatives.

Oduyoye’s experience in Christian studies provided social and ecumenical context through which to exercise her beliefs. Soon after arriving to the Cape Coast in 1966 she was invited to attend a conference by World Student Christian Federation at the University of Ghana, Legon. Later, she would be the first woman and first African to serve as its president. She was also invited by a World Council of Churches representative to attend a meeting in Switzerland with the objective of exploring the role of Christian education in encouraging ecumenism. Smith claims these conferences to be the seeds of Oduyoye’s international and ecumenical work.

**Ecclesial and Ecumenical Involvement**

Oduyoye describes herself as a Ghanaian Methodist with a deep desire to put her religious beliefs and principles into practice. She focused on pedagogy and theology while at the University of Ghana as well as at Cambridge. At Cambridge University she

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72 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, interview by Oluwatomisin Oredein, July 13, 2016.
was involved in the Students Christian Movement (SCM) for two years. She helped initiate a prayer group that was later adopted by some British persons who used it for the foundation of what would become the Christian Union. Unfortunately, this organization proved a contentious space for her. Though the progenitor of this effort, the group ultimately moved away from her intention and purpose. The sentiment behind it changed. What she intended and what she needed was a group to help her work through her Christian discipleship and walk with her; she did not need them to offer guidance concerning her salvation, which she describes was the shift that changed her interest in remaining in the group.\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), xii.} Highly aware of the colonial presence and influence of the Christian faith in her own narrative, Oduyoye’s resistance is notable. It appears that the Christian Union re-inscribed a colonial attitude towards her.

Embedded in this moment was the harm of missionary pedagogy; the assumption was that Oduyoye (and others) needed to be educated in ecumenism. Most Westerners, she explains, lack understanding of pluralism. Africans were already well aware of it: “Africa is very hospitable,” Oduyoye reminds us, “She has played hosted to both Christianity and Islam.”\footnote{Ibid, 78.} Africa has never not known the importance of religion to one’s way of life. African religion has always been “an integral part of African culture

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\textsuperscript{73} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), xii.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 78.
and life.” Oduyoye explains that this organization did not need to teach her how to be a Christian in community with others. She did not need to be schooled in how to co-exist religiously, for she already came from a culture where the religious and the social were intertwined. She came from a place of religious co-existence. She did not need the British to teach her that which she already knew deeply and already lived – that many Christians are impacted and come from spaces of deep religious influence. Oduyoye merely desired Christian community, but the group was not able to provide that for her.

At the tail end of her teaching tenure at the Wesley Girls’ High School, Oduyoye became involved in the World Council of Churches in which she would later be even more involved from 1987 to 1994. From 1967 to 1970, she took on responsibility in the youth department while also working with the World Council of Christian Education. Moving to Nigeria in 1970 (after her marriage to Modupe Oduyoye in 1968), Oduyoye became the youth secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) until 1973. It was in this time that she would develop her first two book publications in pamphlet form specifically designed for youth. These two cartoon books, *Youth Without Jobs* (1972) and *Flight from the Farms* (1973), gave voice to the various conditions that youth in Africa were facing including work woes, issues with educational access, and the struggle for

75 Ibid.
survival amidst the unstable structure of education.\textsuperscript{78}

Oduyoye left the AACC shortly thereafter and taught Biblical criticism in a majority Muslim boys school; she later taught Church History, Missions, and then Christian theology at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria from 1974 until 1986.\textsuperscript{79} At this time, she also served as the assistant editor and then editor of \textit{ORITA}, the Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies.\textsuperscript{80} Teaching in an institution with a majority of male faculty was a space that thrust gender dynamics in front of her in such a way that she was compelled to respond progressively joining efforts for equal pay and equal treatment of women within the academy.\textsuperscript{81}

Pertinent to her academic career was its direct connection to her ecumenical focus and passion. Oduyoye describes herself as the practical type, interested in what the church means within, and is doing within, the world. She served as the staff to the All Africa Conference of Churches and the World Council of Churches. She had a seven-year stint as the World Council of Churches’ deputy general secretary beginning in 1988.


\textsuperscript{80} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “God Alone Gives and Distributes Gifts,” \textit{Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women’s Spiritual Writings} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 455.

She was the first African, male or female, to take up this position.\(^{62}\)

What has garnered Oduyoye the most attention is her ability to fill in the gaps for unheard voices in the ecumenical and theological world. She served as a founder or a founding member of numerous organizations including the World Christian Federation, The World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana where she still serves as its current director.\(^{83}\)

The three ecumenical spaces where Oduyoye has left her most indelible mark are with the World Council of Churches (including her initiative with Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women), the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The


Note of discrepancy: Yolanda Smith accounts her return to the World Council of Churches as being in 1987.

Smith documents how the gender dynamics at work in Oduyoye applying for this position in Geneva, Switzerland were in full display. Oduyoye not received discouragement for applying for the position because it would jeopardize her role as wife to her husband, but she had to receive permission from her husband to apply for the position. She recounted that her husband physically delivered the note to the Methodist Church office in Lagos himself.

Circle), each of which I will overview.84 With an objective of uplifting women within the Christian church, Oduyoye’s ecumenical work is intentionally designed to hear the unheard within the Christian church.85 While her aim is to be a voice that represents their concerns, she has also made it her mission to empower these women to name their realities for themselves.

The World Council of Churches

In 1985, in Nairobi, Kenya Oduyoye was specially invited to take part in a World Council of Churches meeting (held and sponsored by the United Nations). There, with women from all over Africa, she interrogated the power struggles that women in the Third World faced. Her interest was in securing space for them to be heard and for the

84 Yolanda Smith, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye,” accessed November 1, 2015, http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/mercy_oduyoye/. I follow Dr. Yolanda Smith’s organization and lead on naming these ecumenical areas.

85 Christina Landman asserts that in 1986 Oduyoye experienced a shift in her feminist convictions. In publishing the largely church historical text, Hearing and Knowing, Landman suggests that Oduyoye was not highly attuned to the impact of feminism in her work. Only upon teaching stints in the United States at Harvard Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary were her eyes awaken and her feminist critical voice sharpened. By the end of the year, the tone of her work would have a stronger feminist timbre. Landman suggests that Oduyoye gained a keener feminist position upon exposure to the Western education system and Western conceptions of feminist critical analysis. While there might be truth in this, on some levels, we would be remiss to forget the feminist underpinnings Oduyoye gained from her culture, and more specifically from her mother, grandmother and other women in her life that served as a foundation for the evolution of her voice. This is to be examined further in chapter two.

Landman states that Hearing and Knowing only had minimal feminist engagement, thus her work after its publication signals Oduyoye’s Western experience as the stimulus of her “transformation.” But in order to accurately understand the development of her leanings, it would be best to learn from Oduyoye’s own telling of her emergence. Hearing and Knowing had its own pedagogical intention. She explains, “I wrote Hearing and Knowing for students so that they would be able to link theology and church history.” (Oluwatomisin Oredein, “Interview with Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Her Own Words,” Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pp. 153-164, especially 162).

Overall, Oduyoye describes her work as not formally holding the label feminism but “African women’s theology” since the term “feminism” was not utilized by African women in the 1960s and 1970s when she was asserting herself on the theological scene. Though she and other women did not have the terminology made so popular in and by the West, it does not suggest that she did not hold feminist leanings and values early on in her career.
WCC, overall, to take seriously and attend to the global well-being of women. Through Oduyoye’s example, African women began to activate their courage proclaiming their position “on the liberation struggle.”86 A movement of voice had begun.

Oduyoye was a large part of this inclusive initiative where African women demanded space to address the gender disparities they faced and suffered. She created room for women to voice their stories for themselves. She highlighted disparities while simultaneously fighting against them. Thanks in part to Oduyoye, the intervention and opportunities from the United Nations provided African women, on three separate occasions, a platform on which to gain a “global voice and…dramatic visibility.”87

Oduyoye and her peers did run into an obstacle, though. Even with this new opportunity to claim their place in the world, African women still had to battle through other voices claiming to speak for them, namely Western feminists. Oduyoye protests that “Euro-American women were quick to name women’s heightened consciousness as a liberating experience”88 instead of recognizing the complexity of context. They did not acknowledge that action must accompany awareness; consciousness was not enough. This feminine instantiation of colonial patriarchy worked to reinforce the complacent

87 Ibid, 2.
88 Ibid, 3.
place in which African women were fixed.\textsuperscript{89} It did not propel African women forward.

Oduyoye knew their voices and experiences were distinct from her own, so she sought to provide space for herself and women like her to voice their own realities.

In 1982, her voice within the World Council of Churches would be heard through resisting coloniality in African churches. In an article written in their publishing source, *Voices of Unity*, Oduyoye directly spoke about the colonial impact of Christianity on Africa and its people. She asserted that African values treasured wholeness and unity\textsuperscript{80} and a colonial religious foundation served in conflicting ways against these values.

European influence was re-shaping the religious and ecclesial values of Africans.

**WCC’s Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women**

Oduyoye became more outspoken about women’s issues and visibility within the World Council of Churches. She decided to create a lasting response and space for the recognition of women’s issues and interests. Established in 1988, The Decade of

\textsuperscript{89} Conversation with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, July 12, 2016. One such figure Oduyoye personally names is Carrie Pemberton. Oduyoye has described Pemberton’s approach to engaging The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as colonial. According to Oduyoye In the 1990s Pemberton attended a Circle meeting and proceeded to request the attendees to fill out surveys so she could document and continue her study of the Circle. She injected her social and religious study into the aura of the meeting with her ethnographic ambitions and attitude towards the spirit of the event. The Circle was not for Pemberton, though she was welcomed in. She took advantage of the women’s hospitality and treated them like objects of study. Oduyoye found Pemberton’s interruption to complete her study rife with power dynamics and colonial traces. She warns against the information presented on her in Pemberton’s text *Circle Thinking: African Women Theologians in Dialogue With the West*. She insists it inaccurate and overall based on skewed analysis and reflection.

\textsuperscript{80} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 49. Oduyoye briefly explains portions of Akan belief, “The Akan abhor murder, suicide, stealing, insincerity and hypocrisy. They frown upon pride and ostentatiousness. Ingratitude, selfishness, laziness, filthy habits, lasciviousness and sorcery are all things that break of undermine community and therefore are to be avoided.”
Churches in Solidarity with Women initiative centered its work on four themes of economic justice, women’s participation in the church, and racism and violence against women until its conclusion in 1998.\footnote{“As Decades of the Churches in Solidarity with Women ‘Ends,’ Participants Point the Way Forward for Continuing to Work.” Letter to WCC’s 8\textsuperscript{th} Assembly Priorities, Divisive Issues of Human Sexuality. 1998 NCC News Archives, \url{http://www.nccccusa.org/news/news107.html}. On this online platform, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is not explicitly mentioned as a founding member of this decade-long initiative.} It was a response to and modeled Oduyoye’s four-year study, “Community of Men and Women in Church and Society.”\footnote{Yolanda Smith, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye,” accessed November 1, 2015, \url{http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/mercy_oduyoye/}.}

Oduyoye would later reflect on the initial two years of The Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women’s work and impact in her book, \textit{Who Will Roll the Stone Away: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women}.\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), xiii.} In it she inquires what sexism has to do with ecumenism. She reflects on how ecumenical action can be taken on behalf of women of the church urging equal parts care and action from the church at large, not solely from women but from men as well. She asserts that the responsibility for the well-being of all within the body of Christ be a corporal responsibility; the rights of women are the rights of the Christian church. The hope of the project was to “further the equality and dignity of women throughout the world.”\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “God Alone Gives and Distributes Gifts,” \textit{Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women’s Spiritual Writings} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 456.}
EATWOT

In 1976 Mercy Oduyoye first became involved in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, or EATWOT. The next year, she attended the meeting in Accra, Ghana. She wanted to bring to attention and action to the injustices that women in the third-world were experiencing from third-world men and first-world persons.95 Her connections with scholars such as “Virginia Fabella and Mary John Mananzan from the Philippines, Marianne Katoppo from Indonesia, Sun Ai Park from Korea, Ivone Gebara and Elsa Tamez from Latin America” fueled her commitment to the efficacy of the organization.96 Her involvement in EATWOT soon increased; she served as its vice president from 1980 to 1984.97

EATWOT has a mission of paying “attention to the situation in which Christians struggle to live as the body of Christ and to present the gospel.”98 It has also expressed a commitment to attend to women’s issues within the third-world. Oduyoye, thus, created and capitalized on opportunities for collaboration with other women of EATWOT. At the 1981 New Delhi meeting, she and other women began germinating the collective essay work that would become With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing

96 Ibid, 168.
Theology addressing some of the short-comings found in the gatherings and initiatives of EATWOT. Despite how groundbreaking it was, Oduyoye and other women were highly aware of the injustices that still befell women within the organization.99

In 1983 she teamed up with various women to establish the Commission on Theology from Third World Women’s Perspective. It was created to be a “sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression” and to create accountability for the full hearing of women and their experiences in theology.100 This women-focused effort wanted to avoid the dangers of assuming that the (male-constructed) goals of “naming the structures that divide human beings” would suffice and would attend to the global problems that the entire church, especially women, were facing.101 Though progressive in its own right EATWOT’s efforts alone did not reach far enough; African women, for example, had to resist sexism found within Christianity and African culture, so they, and others under similar conditions, formed the EATWOT’s Women’s Commission.102

Ruether details this initiative. From 1985 to 1986, the Women’s Commission would involve a four-stage process that included planning for a national, continental,

100 Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), ix-x.
101 Ibid.
and then a Third World intercontinental meeting. The fourth aspect involved creating spaces in which Third World women theologians and First World feminist theologians would dialogue. This successfully took place in December 1994 in Costa Rica boasting forty-five women theologians from fourteen different countries.\footnote{Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Liberation Theology and African Women’s Theologies,” from \textit{Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone’s Black Theology and Black Power}, Dwight Hopkins, Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 168.}

Oduyoye claims the heart behind her theological work as liberationist, feminist, and even womanist.\footnote{Oluwatomisin Oredein, “Interview with Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Her Own Words,” \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion}, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pp. 153-164, especially 158-159.} Her theological reach is wide: James Cone was a great influence on her work. She has worked with Gustavo Gutiérrez\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, interview by Oluwatomisin Oredein, July 13, 2016.} and has been included in book projects with Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Letty Russell. Oduyoye is familiar with the various arms of the liberation theological tradition. Each perspectival branch holds influence in her life and are part of her expression. Her work joins in with feminist, liberationist, womanist, and other modes of theologizing towards the full life of the Christian church.

**The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**

The progenitor of many initiatives in ecclesial and academic spaces, Oduyoye had a hand in the formation and success of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, or The Circle, one of the largest African women’s networks and
communities focused on religious matters.\textsuperscript{106} Within it, women work to examine
gender’s role in African theological formation and reasoning in an Africa context “still
shaped by the colonial experience and ongoing neocolonial relations with the Western
world.”\textsuperscript{107} The Circle allows African women to destabilize masculinity as the center of
theological witness while highlighting women’s contributions in theological thought.
Pastoral theologian Mpyana Nyengele notes that the Circle “has become a milestone in
the development, growth, and promotion of African women’s theology throughout the
continent and abroad.”\textsuperscript{108} It is a “loose federation of women held together by their
conviction that religion is important to their own personal and professional lives, and
potentially revolutionary to the situation of women in their church and communities.”\textsuperscript{109}
It is a space created for women in search of kindred spirits who learn by listening to
each other.

Its impact is far-reaching. Though it has a Christian theological founding and
focus, the Circle takes seriously “the religious and cultural plurality in Africa,” thus they

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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“embrace African women from all religions resident in Africa” as long as they purport a theological focus in practically living out their faith in the modern world.\textsuperscript{110}

The Circle’s inaugural meeting was attended by eighty women in Accra, Ghana in 1989.\textsuperscript{111} It met under the theme and heading, “Daughter of Africa, Arise!” The biblical mandate, “Talitha Cum!” perfectly captured its origin, purpose, and necessity in affirming that girls and women were, in fact, not dead, but very much living beings alive in Christ.\textsuperscript{112} African women do not have to be spoken for but have voices and experiences they can articulate for themselves.\textsuperscript{113}

Kenyan religious scholar Nyambura J. Njoroge reports that in August 1996 “the second Pan African Conference of the Circle met in Kenya.”\textsuperscript{114} Twice as many registrants showed up for the second meeting as they did the first totaling one hundred and forty women from various areas including West Africa, Fracophone Africa, and southern/eastern Africa. They gathered to present, listen to, and workshop papers;

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, 78.
eventually many of these papers were published, a gift for many of the women since publishing opportunities had since been scarce.

In 1999 the Circle co-convened a joint theological conference with various organizations “including the regional and country chapters of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), the Congress of Association of Theological Institutions (CATI), and… the Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC).” 115 At the conclusion of the conference they “issued a joint communiqué naming twenty-two issues that demanded urgent and collective action from all concerned.” 116

The Circle’s focus is the ordinary African woman. It seeks to provide space in which women can examine the political and the theological conditions that have marginalized Africans, whether colonial or culturally, especially within the Christian church.

Oduyoye’s emphasis on women’s speech emerges from her experience of being silenced and witnessing the silencing of other women. She presses the question of what the lack of female presence within theological and ecclesial representation means for the welfare of an inclusive African theology – and she does so through naming where women are not.

116 Ibid.
Some argue that the Circle was born, in part, from Oduyoye’s experience of isolation and sexist treatment in being the only woman in her intellectual field at the time; they insist that the Circle was birthed by Oduyoye’s wrestling with her position and place as a woman in the academy. One such instance Oduyoye recounts as particularly impactful. Finding herself the only female theologian amongst her male colleagues in a meeting, she was asked to do the domestic role of fetching drinks for, and thus serving, all the men present. She refused instead summoning the man responsible for providing refreshments at the meeting.\(^{117}\) The question arises of how the assumed modifiers of “African,” “theologian,” or “African theologian” came to be primarily affiliated with maleness.\(^{118}\) These instances and more contributed to her desire to write *Daughters of Anowa*. It helped spur the initiative of creating spaces for women who were missing in places that affected them.\(^{119}\) Not being well resourced and adequately supported contributed to the Circle’s slow emergence, nine years in the making.\(^{120}\) But the Circle accomplished and still accomplishes its purpose, serving as a

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place for a communal theology among women. “Our story is one of letting it be known that African women are awake,” Oduyoye asserts. The Circle begins with African women supporting women in Africa and in diaspora; it offers women of African descent space to be supported, support one another, and to network. There is something to be said for women creating the very spaces they were forced to leave in order to feel seen. The Circle’s existence offers a glimpse into how the scope of Oduyoye’s work centers on uplift and empowerment.

**Why Oduyoye?**

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the theological progenitor of what she calls, “African women’s theologies,” a theological system of thought originating from African women themselves, and specifically from the religious movement, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Known as a number of things, including, “Circle theology; communal theology; bosadi hermeneutics…cultural hermeneutics; womanist theologies, and African women’s theologies,” African women’s theology is a theological event of

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123 Ibid.

liberation. It draws on the voices and experiences of African women overlooked by the dominant voices that have established the theological foundation of Africa’s Christian expression. African women’s theology is a necessary theological branch, for it moves closer to holding the fullness of African perspective in full view.

In order to answer “Why Oduyoye?” it is best to first visit a question she implicitly asks in the genesis of her theological work: why Christianity for Africans? The gap between lived Christianity and preached Christianity in African contexts provided an entry point through which African women’s voices could emerge, but it did not offer a solution to cultures divided between traditional religious expression and Christian expression authored by European standards. The riposte was in the joining - for Oduyoye, the Christianity she would learn to create for herself offered a message not

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Phiri and Nadar are careful to name that though some African women claim their work as feminist or womanist, that African women “do not want to be called feminist, because of its seeming neglect of race and class; neither do we want to be called womanist because, as some have argued, the experiences of African-American women are different from those of African women.” Oduyoye in her work, argues this herself.

Within the EATWOT gatherings Oduyoye is careful to specify that she is not referring to “EATWOT minorities from the U.S.A.,” or African-Americans, within the EATWOT-inspired collection of papers that would become *With Passion and Compassion*. Her focus is more on African-identifying women within the African continental context. She categorizes these voices as necessary within a separate “intra-EATWOT dialogue.”

125 It is important to note, however, that a number of issues have not been addressed within African theology including but not limited to the invisibility of non-heteronormative African gender and sexual theological perspectives.
only of justice and peace, but also of hope - and hope that this faith presently has room for voices to exist in their unique complexity.\textsuperscript{126}

Oduyoye, women like her, and the women coming after her insist on “carrying their own heads.”\textsuperscript{127} It is an insistence of communal support for one’s intentions. Carrying your own head “is a concept that simply implies listening to the community and letting your self-determination be shaped by a vision of its ideals.”\textsuperscript{128} It implies one having weight in their social world.

Oduyoye’s feminist roots and Christian identity fuel her desire to see the invisible and hear the unheard. In the next chapter I examine how her formation as an Akan woman firm in her identity attends to the gaps found within her culture and within the Christian faith towards the full recognition of African women as agents of their own futures.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
Chapter Two | A Feminist Evolution

In order to begin the experience of fully human living, whatever gender we are, we are called to refuse to be what others require us to be. We must become instruments against our own convictions. As a people, we must never acquiesce to our own marginalization.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Feminist Foundations

Mercy Amba Oduyoye represents a canon of voices who have always spoken about God and the divine, but who have lacked listeners within their communities and within Christian discourse. Her objective is to garner for herself and other women like her the same respect as their African male and Western theological counterparts. African women’s barriers of race and gender in the theological world (not to mention ethnicity and class) deserve the Christian church’s attention. In order to develop the tongue to speak these truths Oduyoye gathered lessons from the women in her life and from her personal experiences as a woman in Africa, the West, and within academic, ecumenical, and ecclesial settings. These settings would be the platforms in which her voice would develop its current sound.

Oduyoye learned that though Christianity was a large part of her narrative, her culture, and the story of her people, who she was and was to be as an Akan woman was
the key determinant of her identity. Her culture informed her Christian outlook and practice, not the other way around. Like all women, Oduyoye is a complicated figure influenced and impacted by history – the historical treatment of Akan women, the history of her family’s interactions with the Christian faith, and the history(making) of Ghana as a nation. She is a product of resistance and the shifts it creates.

To best understand the shape of Oduyoye’s voice and Christian perspective we must take a closer look at her cultural foundations, namely the conception of kinship and culture of the Akan people of Ghana. We must examine which aspects of her life trajectory render her story different, peripheral, or tensive, looking in-depth into what would be considered a normative life for an Akan person, and specifically an Akan woman and reflect on the development of her conscious voice. We must examine the cultural space in which Oduyoye was raised. From this place we can then see how Oduyoye’s life engenders points of difference that pushes Christian theology within the African context beyond itself towards rightly hearing and considering what her voice, and the voices of other women, bring to Christian conversation.

There are stories of feminist recognition and awakening in between the events of Oduyoye’s life that we would be remiss to ignore. They provide the building blocks of her theological, cultural, and social outlook. In paying attention to her words and actions as a West African woman gaining voice amidst colonial influence and global progress on racial and gender scales, we are made cognizant of the configuration of Oduyoye’s
witness. My objective is to trace the details that lead to and color such moments with Oduyoye’s life and to interpret them as not merely event, but as contributing to and building Oduyoye’s modus operandi.

In this chapter I explore the contours of Oduyoye’s voice amidst the lessons taught her from matrilineal Akan culture, particularly around ideas of the purpose of women, the details of Akan women’s desires, and how Oduyoye subverts such expectations. Through this, I examine from whence her theological voice comes by attending to the cultural and identity formations she is assigned, sorts through, and determines whether she wants to lay claim to. In detailing the formation and evolution of her womanhood and imagination as a woman, I aim to add depth to her biographical trajectory we encountered in chapter one.

It is important to name, the evolution of Oduyoye’s feminist stance as gradual, comprised of observation and wondering and eventually resistance towards the logic, practices, and structures that delimit her vision for herself. Oduyoye grows in a certain direction because of her experience and interpretation of how her culture positions its women. Her feminism is not purely Western, but conglomerate and distinctly her own as an Akan woman. To force Western conceptions of women’s advancement and feminist advocacy onto her story reinforces the colonial feminist action Oduyoye has
spent much of her career fighting.¹ This chapter, then, stories her consciousness towards the equal treatment of Akan women, but, her position is not easily pinned down, resolved, nor intended to feel complete or right in any way. Oduyoye’s freedom in this way characterizes her feminist position. She gets to determine its features. It is distinctly her own, impacting her vision and thus the theological work she offers on behalf of African women whose voices and viewpoints have been overlooked. I want to press into identifying the feminist inklings and moments that catalyze Oduyoye’s path towards living into her Akan womanhood in the ways she determines is best suited for her goals, ambitions, and life objectives.

To Be an Akan Woman

Oduyoye stretches the peripheries and potential of her Ghanaian identity towards the full inclusivity of its women. She pushes the boundaries of womanhood and dares to define it for herself, respective of the culture, but also corrective of its shortcomings. Her understanding of herself as an Akan woman curious about Christian theology is a crucial point through which her theological outlook would be directed and developed. She describes her conflation of identities in this way. These modes of identity will guide our exploration throughout the chapter:

¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 87. For example, Oduyoye rails against the harmful effects of white Western feminism’s attempts to narrate African women’s stories. She issues this truth, “…our well-meaning sisters should consider that the African woman should be empowered to tell her own story, or else be left alone.”
My feminist heritage was heightened not only by being my mother’s daughter but also by growing up in the Asante and Brong areas in Ghana, where my parents served the Methodist Church. Any conscious upbringing I had was aimed at making me a lover of the church and grateful to God for being who I am: an African woman who is a Christian.2

Oduyoye identifies as Akan woman of Asante descent.3 The Akan are a multi-ethnic and agricultural people widespread in various parts of Ghana, but particularly in southern half of the country.4 They constitute approximately half of the ethnic population of Ghana.5 Culturally, the Akan are a people who operate under a matrilineal familial system. This way of life privileges blood lines to one’s mother as a means to equally share and thus secure, for both women and men, decision-making, reciprocity, economic safety and equal power


3 Tabitha Otieno and Alberta Yeboah. “Gender and Cultural Practices: The Akan of Ghana and the Gushi of Kenya.” Journal of Intercultural Disciplines, 10/2004, Volume 5, pp. 108-127, especially 108. Otieno and Yeboah describe the Akan as ethnically diverse as a people group. They make up almost half of the ethnic groups in Ghana (45%) and live in various regions of the “Western, Central, Ashanti, and Brong-Ahafo regions of Ghana, parts of the Eastern and Volta regions of Ghana, and the southeastern corner of La Cote d’Ivoire (Sarpong, 1991).” They have a variety including the Agona, Ahanta, Akuapem, Akyem, Asante, Assen-Twifo, Brong, Fante, Kwawu, Nzema, and Wassa (Sarpong, 1991).”


It is argued that the Akan “geographically dominate about two-thirds of the area of Ghana occupying...the areas between the Black Volta and Guinea Coast.”

The objective of emphasizing matrilineal ties is to provide a constant and secure support for anyone, but especially women, who would not have the security options to which one in a more powerful position may be more privy. The Akan practice of matrilineal recognition and practice is one that, unlike the practices of other peoples who ascribe explicitly to patrilineal patterns, aims to protect and keep its women on equal footing in various areas of life, treating them as important members within society.

The greatest strength of the Akan matrilineal tradition is its economic and political protection of women. In its traditional understandings, women’s roles as policy-makers was linked to the position of ṣhemaa or Queen Mother, the traditional female ruler of the Asante political system. Her position as ruler and kingmaker served as the foundation of Asante thought and consciousness concerning the influence of its women on the entire community. In this, then, women were positioned as critical and

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In a footnote Oduoye identifies the difference between matriarchy and matrilineality. “A matriarchy is a system of governance in which women have political power and direct rule,” thus the structure of the Asante where the practices are as such falls in line with this. A matrilineage, though, “is a system in which women have rights of inheritance and ownership.” One’s status is determined by their mother’s line. The Asante, and the Akan, specifically fall under this category of social and cultural relationality. Given this clarity, the patriarchal aspects of Akan culture suggest not necessarily failure of matriarchal and/or matrilineal practice, but of the power and influence of patriarchal practice (whether African originated or through Western cultural syncretization).

8 Ibid, 92.
selective forces in political and social affairs.\(^9\)

But the matrilineal practice is not without its own shortcomings and limitations. Its protection and care reaches its limit when confronting the gendered practices (and what the West would deem gender roles) to which Akan women are expected to adhere. Their matrilineality lives within patriarchal parameters. The benefits of matrilineal culture only extend their privileging of its women in so many ways. Akan women are trapped into narrow expectations of marriage and maternity.

Pastoral theologian Mpyana Nyengele describes the dynamics of gender within the contours of Akan conceptions of marriage through exploring it from the angle of male expectation. He does so in order to prove the point that although both women and men in Akan culture undergo the pressures and expectation of marriage and parenthood, the expectations are unfair to and most taxing on its women.\(^10\) Its force is felt greatest on the Akan women, while its benefit is for the men.

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\(^9\) Ibid, 94. Though, to be clear, the Queen Mother was politically “higher” than the “King” (\(\varphi\)hene) in the ruling hierarchy, women were not superior decision-makers. The Akan were never under full female control. According to Oduyoye, “Traditionally the Akan people did not belong to one political structure, but were constituted into aman (nations) very much like the city-states of medieval Europe. Each nation was composed of several matrilineages that formed the Akan matri-clans spread throughout southern Ghana. This matrilineal organization differentiated the Akan from the surrounding peoples. Within the nation, each autonomous political unit (\(\varphi\)man) had a capital (ahenkuro).

\(^10\) Ibid, 65.

Especially given the vague sense that marital expectation as Oduyoye notes, “The rules of marriage are known and adhered to be everybody. Both women and men are told that they have everything to gain from these relatively permanent heterosexual relations.”
The Akan’s matrilineal emphases ultimately benefit men most. Women, though prized within the culture, are positioned as for men. “According to Oduyoye,” he describes,

the Akan male engages in marriage to guarantee his future comfort and security. His wife becomes a means of bringing back the ancestors to life. In this sense, she is not only in service for her husband, but also for the whole family in that she becomes a “conduit” through which the ancestors perpetuate the lineage and, as such, connect with the offspring.11

When communal notions of continuity are at stake, the matrilineal culture of the Akan serves the larger community in a way that can be considered suppressive to its women.

At the intersection of desires of proliferating the people and notions of autonomy and equity, fairness towards women takes on a different shape; it transforms into that which values the desires of men over women’s desires, the hopes of the community above those of the women impacted by it. In this logic, women’s value is primarily placed on their reproductive capability; this helps keep women’s cultural value.12 It is

12 I want to suggest that functioning here is an undergirding of patriarchal assumptions and practices even within matrilineal cultures, where the value of women are found in what she can (re)produce, not for herself, but for her community is at work (which implies within it an assumption of male domination and desire). The fear/sentiment/drive that founds reproductive requirement suggests an expression of cultural desire foreign to women, but taught to women as to be desired. In other words, the interplay of cultural desire and ontological desire begs the question: where do women learn that they must be mothers in order for their lives to make sense and to have purpose? Would women risk their lives (in childbirth) in order to continue the line of their people by the own volition? The influence of another party, the males of the Akan, seems suggestive of influencing such a cultural norm and reinforcing it as such, even within a cultural
the norm for Akan women to be expected to live into the roles of wife and mother. In this, they literally hold the legacy of their people in and through their bodies as well as respect and prestige from their people. To break this mold is to bring into question and into jeopardy the foundation of Akan cultural belief. Oduyoye would have questions all her life about women’s place within this system; it would culminate in her own encounter with marriage.

**A Challenging Lesson**

One of the most interesting aspects of Oduyoye’s story concerns how she narrates the stages of her feminist development and consciousness. She notes that her greatest moment of insight came through coming face-to-face with West African patriarchal culture, directly. She deems her marital moment to a Nigerian man the time when her eyes were most opened to patriarchy’s dangerous effects. She recalls, “Coming paradigm which supposedly lifts up its women’s input and voice as critical to its identity. The questions remains, and quite powerfully so, “Who teaches women that they must reproduce?”


Matrilineal identity is also characterized by who one “inherits.” Within this cultural system, “children do not inherit their fathers, but their maternal uncle. In this respect, both males and females can inherit the maternal uncle.” Interestingly enough, “… daughters can inherit their mothers, but boys cannot inherit their mothers. The only person a boy can inherit is the maternal uncle.” In this the Akan woman is protected as one who will receive security and protection, if needed.


To clarify, marriage and motherhood are expected of many women in addition to providing economic contribution to the household – with both being considered domestic work. The notion of being a housewife was a Western concept and luxury introduced, but not native to, Akan people. Oduyoye details how her mother and mother-in-law went to a special school for homemaking (her mother attended the Wesleyan Girls’ High School).
into contact through marriage with the patriarchal Yoruba culture of Nigeria was a traumatic experience...”

In 1968 Mercy married the Nigerian, Adedoyin Modupe Oduyoye, a storied linguist, renowned publisher and writer, Yale graduate, and self-identified Anglican, who most importantly, was a man of Yoruba descent. It was in marriage into this culture, the Yoruba culture, that Oduyoye notes she first found out that the equal treatment of men and women were not commonplace among varying African peoples and their cultures. In some tribes such as the patrilineal and patriarchal Yoruba tribe of Southwest Nigeria, men are unapologetically honored and privileged above the women who are treated as secondary. It is their tradition and custom. The starkness of this contrast to the matrilineal cultural values of the Akan appeared to be in direct opposition to Oduyoye’s life experiences.

In Yoruba culture, a woman is considered central, but in subservient roles, important primarily in maintaining domestic life and her place “in her husband’s house.” Traditionally, in Akan culture, women are considered important, and central

to political life as well as to the home life.\textsuperscript{18} Oduyoye was not accustomed to the total devaluation of women as cultural norm. For her, the positive aspects of the Akan’s matrilineal culture are clear.

Reflecting on women’s importance and empowerment Oduyoye notes from her own experience in Akan culture, “By and large, I could live with the system. In theory, nothing prevented me from being myself, a member of a group sharing the responsibility for its being, integrity, and wholeness.”\textsuperscript{19} She felt secure in her female personhood as her culture created space for its women to thrive. Matrilineal identity served as a protective force for Akan women, even if Oduyoye only lived into this reality on her mother’s side of the family.

The contradictions within Akan matrilineal culture, however, also gave Oduyoye pause; its downsides played into her understanding of its messiness. Oduyoye’s relationship to her father’s side of the family felt less empowering for her. As a child in the presence of her father’s family, she felt that she and her brothers had no place. Growing up, she found that this (mis)treatment (from her father’s side) did not prove


In \textit{Daughters of Anowa}, Oduyoye explains the difference between the Akan (or matrilineal) household and the Yoruba (or patrilineal) household. For Akan women, “a wife’s companions and colleagues are the other wives. In patrilineal groups, these domestic establishments can become small-scale industries and trading cooperatives…” In other words, the juxtaposition of communal living versus machinated living are brought to the fore illumine the different cultural approaches to social life and its means of productivity.

important enough to address as it did not impact her perception of her value or place. But, it took root in her imaginings of communal treatment as she claimed that, “outside the group [her mother’s family line] I was a non-entity, or so I felt.” She does not further expound on this contradictory notion of value and valueless-ness she wrestles with existing as who she is between her parent’s families, but one can deduce some incongruity in her statement and sentiment. Although she makes the case for equal discriminatory treatment towards herself and her brothers, what Oduyoye does not account for in this explanation are the other details of treatment already in place that favor the males of her culture. Therefore, though the rejection of her father’s side of the family might appear universally applicable to her and her siblings, a message of belonging is being issued forth within a culture that already considers male children as human beings but females as solely purposed towards marriage and maternity. Thus, the rebuff holds more layers than perceived.

What occurs on her father’s side must not be ignored, for patriarchy embedded and normalized itself into matrilineal culture, too. Though eager to defend the positive aspects of her culture, Oduyoye did notice its inconsistencies. As a child she “had serious questions about how the African principles of complementarity and reciprocity

20 Ibid.
21 Tabitha Otieno and Alberta Yeboah. “Gender and Cultural Practices: The Akan of Ghana and the Gushi of Kenya.” Journal of Intercultural Disciplines, 10/2004, Volume 5, pp. 108-127, especially 113. One way this is evidenced is in the birth preference of a male child over a female child. Otieno and Yeboah note, “when a woman gives birth to a son, she is congratulated with the words, —well done for giving birth to a human being.”
operated in a hierarchy...”\textsuperscript{22} She was aware of the gender imbalance at a young age, yet it would take time for Oduyoye to openly name the contestation occurring within her people’s cultural foundation, as it was one that proved helpful to her many times. She wrestled with how something that uplifted women could, in some ways, hold them back at the same time.

Though she claims her marriage to a Nigerian man an important moment of feminist awakening, Oduyoye would come to admit her culture’s blind spots regarding its treatment of women. Her sense of awareness of the practices within her own culture was somewhat sharpened \textit{through} interrogating the practices of Yoruba culture. She explains how her 1995 work \textit{Daughters of Anowa} is the exploration of her recognizing patriarchy’s reach and how she came “to realize that by looking more critically around us, as well as deeper into our history, we can be motivated and empowered to create structures that obviate all that we have denounced in patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{23} Her experience with patriarchal practice in African culture, matrilineal and patrilineal, helped fuel her theological mission to discern where women’s empowerment in African culture and Christianity can come from and how it might manifest in powerful and immediate ways.

Cultural Conundrums

Oduyoye did not quite fall in line with traditional Akan understanding of womanhood. With an awareness of what she aspired to achieve and wanted for herself, she purposely lead her life on her own terms regarding her interests and ideas with just as much importance as those expected of her from her people’s traditions. Being an Akan woman was not the same as Akan womanhood. Intentionally resistant to her patriarchal-matrilineal culture, Oduyoye aimed to carve out a different path for herself. She was supposed to have become married and become a mother at a young age, as marriage was the logical step towards ensuring progeny. Her status as mother was supposed to a determining factor in cementing her identity as an Akan woman fulfilling

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24 Oduyoye holds her own complexity even within this narrative of empowerment. She details her journey around desiring and aspiring towards motherhood in “A Coming Home to Myself: A Childless Woman in a West African Space” from Liberating Eschatologies: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell.

25 Mercy Amba Odouye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 79. Odouye maintains “that the identity and autonomy of women fare not much better today under the matrilineal systems of the Akan group than under the over patriarchies of southern Nigeria, and most particularly, the patriarchal system that operates among the Yoruba” the tribe into which she married.


An expectation which systematizes polygyny in order for men to have as many wives as he wants but shuns polyandry, the ability for a woman to have many husbands. The polygyny appears to be more socially acceptable because of the emphasis on women’s responsibility to bear children for a man.

Furthering this notion of the importance of marriage is the practice of betrothal where girls are paired off to a man of her same age group or not. The impetus driving this practice is to “assure the betrothed girl child of a perfect future” The hope is that “she will have many children and thereby gain the respect of members of the ethnic group because among the Akan, the more children a woman has, the more respect and prestige she commands.” It is her means of contributing to the continuation of the Akan as a people.

27 The marriage-to-motherhood trajectory is another topic for further consideration outside of the scope of this project. A particular kinship respectability is most certainly being identified in this familial and cultural system.
this particular mode of womanhood,28 “the center of the kinship unit”29 and communal life.

Though married, she did not make it her life’s mission or sole objective to have a child. This, however, did not prevent her from desiring motherhood. She tried to become a mother as she deeply wanted to have biological children of her own. But she also wanted to author the contents of her desire. Though she wanted children, and even wrestled with what the absence of children meant within her marriage, she would learn not to deem herself a failure of her people for not having them.

Akan women must marry and must mother to be seen as on the right side of culture. Oduyoye sought an alternative way of living amidst this pressure. Her rubbing up against culture and creating her own path begs the question: with the importance of Akan identity resting primarily in their reproductive capability and conformity, how might women be liberated to be someone (not “something,” if the aim is to move away from objectifying language and implications) different within their culture? For Oduyoye, naming women’s oppressions was an initial step towards their total liberation, but it would take small moments of questioning for this revelation to take root in her theological and ethical imagination.

Even though Akan women are, in a sense, admired for their ability to keep the

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bloodline by becoming mothers, they still experience marginalization.\textsuperscript{30} This cultural stance does not prove beneficial to Akan women – it, instead, relegates women to particular gender roles.\textsuperscript{31} Growing up, Oduyoye admittedly and openly wrestled with the odd marriage of women’s familial and communal roles and expectations. “It seemed to me, however, that the more these women made others comfortable and dependent upon them, the more they felt alive. I absorbed all of this,” she states.\textsuperscript{32} In this reflection, Oduyoye puts name to the dilemma of whom women are women for within Akan culture. While the focus on motherhood has communal benefit and implications, the role of women proves a bit disconcerting as it pressures women into certain familial roles that benefit and are determined by men. Oduyoye’s own life trajectory, while keeping in mind the expectations imprinted in her culture and thus her own psyche, took a different road – and this served a role in the formation of her theological voice and focus.

While Oduyoye elected to become married “later” in life, the trajectory of her life moved in a variant direction than the one hoped and assumed for her. Her ministerial calling and career took precedent. Her not being a biological mother means something in

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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 100 - 108. Akan women are further saddled with economic responsibilities for provide and care for their families and communities.

light of her theological presence and work.\footnote{See Oduyoye’s essay, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space” on more about her various forms of mothering from Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell, Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones, Eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).} Oduyoye broke the mold of the typical Akan woman’s life path objective in critical ways. She pursued her calling and career first; she married when she wanted and only after having a firm grasp on the direction of her ministerial future. She privileged her own desires doing life out of order and on her own terms. She took a firm stance within her culture. It would not determine her future. She would. And she would take its precepts of communal importance seriously. As a woman, she would live into the notion that the well-being of the community as a whole is critical to Akan identity. She understood some aspects of her culture to be guide but not the hard and fast rule of her living.

A question then emerges: given this life-trajectory, is Oduyoye a \textit{true} Akan woman? From whom does she take her cue learning to lead her life on her own terms and how does this decision honor Akan values? What does her attachment to the Akan woman’s “feminist ancestry,” as she calls it, mean for her cultural perception?\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong,” from Inheriting our Mothers’ Gardens Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective, Letty M. Russell, Kwok Pui-lan, Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, and Katie Geneva Cannon, Eds. (Louisville: Westminster, 1988), 38.} Given Akan women’s cultural position and duties, what does a woman like Oduyoye mean for Akan cultural life? Her refusal to assimilate by any means necessary signals resistance of a larger scale.
Oduyoye’s legacy as a woman would prove vital to her empowerment. Being an Akan woman gave Oduyoye a level of visibility and power as an integral member of the community. Even though the West encroached onto the kinship beliefs and structure of the Akan introducing notions of individualism and a totalizing patriarchy, Oduyoye felt firm in her importance as a woman within her culture, thanks to the women in her life teaching her such lessons. They taught her to consider herself.

Oduyoye came from a line of women of strong resolve who knew the balance of keeping their culture’s strengths in front of them while affiliating with the Christian church only as needed.\textsuperscript{35} Being an Akan woman helped give Oduyoye a gender-sensitive and feminist lens\textsuperscript{36} that would shape how she moved about as a woman of Akan descent. It would be in and from the discerning wisdom of the women in her life that Oduyoye would learn her worth.

**On Akan Mothers and Christian Skepticism**

In matrilineal culture, the bloodline of one’s mother is seen as a life force.\textsuperscript{37} One’s connection to their mother, in part, determines one’s connection to the people. On her mother’s side, Oduyoye is linked to the royal Asene family who later migrated to

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 36-41. Oduyoye’s mother was always hesitant to fully trust this Christianity that announced itself and European-ness as the same entity.

\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps Akan feminism can be described as a kind of matrilinealism and its advocates, matrilinealists. It seems, though, that even within this, it privileges patriarchal practice (even if it does not privilege patrilineal cultural practice).

\textsuperscript{37} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 119. I do not have space to explore this in depth here, but the irony of blood as both sacred and taboo, is something for further consideration especially as it serves as a parallel to Akan women’s movement about and within their culture and society.
Akyem. They settled in Asamankese becoming rich cocoa farmers. They would convert to the Presbyterian faith, an ecclesial tradition that Oduyoye would not inherit for good reason as her mother and her grandfather had a rocky relationship with the Reformed faith. Oduyoye instead chose to become a Methodist like her father.\textsuperscript{38} The resistance of this mode of religiosity by her family, especially the women in her life, from her grandmother to her mother, would teach her how to take and hold some religious agency.

Oduyoye was taught to approach the Christian faith interrogatively through the lens of her cultural foundation. This “hermeneutic of suspicion” was not taught to her in a classroom or even termed as such; the inclination to question Christian precept and practice runs in her blood, and it came from her mother(s). Caution came through the wisdom of being Asante and Brong; because of her identity she learned where to trust and where to question, how to survive and who and what to resist in order to do so.

Oduyoye’s matrilineality would work in empowering ways for her. She was allowed and granted space for resistance because the women in her life said so. Her

\textsuperscript{38} Amoah traces how Oduyoye’s grandmother’s interaction with the Christian faith set the foundation for Oduyoye’s approach and relation to the faith. Her grandmother was given in marriage to Ampofo Amenano from the Brong Ahafo region. He lived in Asamankese until the Presbyterians, the predominant Christian ecclesial presence in Ghana, “enforced a regulation that all who had not converted to Christianity should move out.” Though he did eventually convert to Christianity, he chose to relocate first and “did not move to the Basel Mission ghetto.” Land that was native to her grandfather come under Presbyterian regulation would not be the space in which Amenano lived, and nor would Oduyoye. Amoah describes, “Mercy too has refused to become a ghettoed Methodist.” She would not be told where to live and how to live by Christian religious forces. This in part colors the variant nature of her ecumenical involvement and ambitions. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, Eds. African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), xviii-xix.
Christian complexity can be seen clearly in this. Through her bloodline Oduyoye is both Christian convert and resistant to total blind acceptance of it. Her bloodline still trusts its ancestors and its people as capable progenitors of life dialogue and religious meaning in itself.

Oduyoye is explicit in naming that her mother’s bloodline matters to her and determines her identity in powerful ways. It signals the strength of her identity. Though in a culture that contained patriarchal elements, Oduyoye’s experience of the patriarchal came to a halt when it came to the women asserting their value. Her bloodline resisted the growing patriarchal aspects within Akan culture. She explains it in this way:

I knew then I had in my veins the blood of mothers who would not be ordered around, not even by illustrious sons of the clan, brothers whose inheritance their children, being nephews, would claim. I knew then that my mothers would mother and honor and serve only the men they chose to espouse – not men as men. They gave their all to those whom they, the mothers, considered worthy.39

Oduyoye comes from women who know their value and place, who understand their worth and believe it enough to act on. Her mothers were the women of her culture who knew who they were and passed down that same sentiment to their daughters. These women were cognizant of who they would give themselves to and how. They valued their culture and thus regarded their own importance as representative of the culture. The wisdom from her mothers taught Oduyoye to question Akan culture and

the Christian faith, and as an Akan woman, it was only right that she listened to her (maternal) elders.

For Oduyoye, African culture is equally determinant of, if not most determinant of, her African Christian identity. She treats her Akan womanhood (as she exercises it) as the centripetal force for her theological thoughtfulness. She actively privileges her mother’s ancestral side in part because of women’s contradictory treatment within her culture, but also because of her desire for her culture to privilege its women as critical agents.

Her mother’s side, historicized as strong-willed was, quite importantly, skeptical of Christianity because of its colonial roots. Never afforded a formal education due to the “elitist educational system set up by the missions,” Oduyoye’s mother saw Christianity positioned as means of salvation (through educational means and access), but quite unreachable for herself and for other women like her.\(^{40}\) Akan women were already placed within a culture where, according to custom, women invested in their children—particularly boys—and saw to it that their men were favored. This adverse aspect of Akan culture saw service to God as above their women’s own well-being. This demonstrated, then, that though desiring their own sense of wellness, Akan women’s “thriving” and wellness was entirely contingent on the state of the entire community.

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 46.
It is no surprise that dissatisfaction lived with the women in Oduyoye’s family - dissatisfaction of their current place within the Akan cultural order of things, and dissatisfaction of women not serving in leadership roles within the church. The sacrifices of Oduyoye’s mother’s generation would provide the opportunities for their daughters to live differently. ⁴¹ These women believed somewhat in the “worthwhileness” of the church, but they also believed in the potential of the women who would come after them, to change it. ⁴²

Oduyoye is both Akan woman and Christian woman, but most notably an Akan woman raised to view Christianity with a watchful and critical eye. She employs an Akan woman’s suspicion towards the Christian faith – this moment of missional Christian offering. It would make sense that Akan women met the colonial faith tradition with mistrust and hesitation; it did not alter their situation or place within society, but arguably further marginalized them away from being pivotal figures within their own communities.

What this skepticism illustrates is not necessarily a divided identity for Oduyoye, but a multiplicitous one, and of hybridization. It is descriptive of how some, or arguably many, Africans live into their identities as Christians. Oduyoye’s culture and its Christian expression require her to query the details of who is she and who she is supposed to be in order to truly be an African woman who is Christian. Her mother

imparted care towards protecting and keeping her sense of identity untouched by this Christian religious tradition. Oduyoye learned from the women in her life and lineage that it is of the utmost importance to keep her identity unblemished and unaltered; her identity already was before Christianity met them. Her identity did not come from nor start with European religious claims on her or her people’s being. In this, Oduyoye’s inherited resistance not only employs a postcolonial tinge, but also moves against patriarchy as a normalized and cultural form of self-understanding.\textsuperscript{43}

Her mother taught her to protect her identity and, in that, to nurture herself. She taught her that the maternal expectations (when considered solely as biological means) throughout the Akan culture is secondary to self-fulfillment, self-actualization, or perhaps secondary to nurturing herself and her own life first. Recalling her mother’s advice to stand on her feet and care for her own future, first, Oduyoye’s mother introduced her to the notion of mothering herself. She taught her to actively resist the patriarchalizing of their maternal-focused culture. And true to its form, Oduyoye’s work resists patriarchal and colonial presence, forces, and pressures. She took to heart that women are autonomous beings who have desires of their own, and who are critical to Akan culture in ways that exceed anatomical ability alone. Women are important

\textsuperscript{43} Tabitha Otieno and Alberta Yeboah. “Gender and Cultural Practices: The Akan of Ghana and the Gushi of Kenya.” \textit{Journal of Intercultural Disciplines}, 10/2004, Volume 5, pp. 108-127, especially 113. One way this is evidenced is in the birth preference of a male child over a female child. Otieno and Yeboah note, “when a woman gives birth to a son, she is congratulated with the words, —well done for giving birth to a human being.”
because they are human beings. Oduyoye’s mother imparted in her the first evidence of, what could arguably be deemed a “Christian,” theological anthropology.

Oduyoye’s theological position holds together the tension of her identity and Christian religiosity. Her sense of self comes from her exploration of contradictions – that Akan women could be their own agential determinants, and that, for Akan women, their own cultural sense of womanhood superseded the Christian identity that their culture would place value in. Through questioning the details of her identity and its gender assignments of its women, Oduyoye learned from the women themselves that Akan womanhood encompassed much more than the expectations asserted onto them from internal or external cultural impressions and forces. Being an Akan woman meant holding on to a particular sense of agency, apart from cultural postulation.44

For Oduyoye, Christianity is a complex enterprise. Growing up, Europeans taught her that being a Christian had to exclude certain aspects of African identity, including those demonstrating Akan communal consideration, inclusion, and equal participation. This form of Christianity, Oduyoye would move against; she would find


Quoting Ama Ata Aidoo, Oduyoye attends to the complexity of African women’s agency amidst restrictive cultural practice. For many Western women looking on the outside in, African women’s questions of agency or lack thereof is more a working out of Western identity issues. African women hold agency in various forms even amidst the strictures of marital and maternal expectation. Western perception of her (African) life only does not examine or address the nuances of her agency, but merely ensures her position as beneath the Western woman in the hierarchical scheme of things.
connection in a variant mode of Christianity that both pointed towards a hopeful faith tradition and cultural consideration of all of its members.

One to live in the liminal spaces of identity and agency, Oduyoye openly questioned and examined whether her Christian identity and African identity could coexist or if they would clash. Both modes of identity held prominence amongst the Akan people. A question becomes apparent about the place of Akan Christian women. Within the contours of her people’s Christian expression as both dangerously gendered and built from a colonial religion, what did Akan Christianity mean for its women? These questions and more preoccupied the foundations of Oduyoye’s approach to her theological work, as she sought to understand what an Akan Christian womanhood could look like.

To understand origins of what such a voice sounded like, one in the line of her mothers and her ancestors, Oduyoye examined her maternal line and what kinds of claims womanhood made on Akan life, whether Christian or not. In her maternally reflective essay “Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong” from *Inheriting our Mothers’ Gardens*, she recounts,

> Living out my Christianized Akan background, I have never ceased to dig around that culture in search of my mother’s specifically Asante and Brong backgrounds, the side of the family that was not as completely sold on Christianity as other branches seemed to be.⁴⁵

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It would be many Akan women’s position that though Christian, their culture would not be lost on them, especially the women-positive aspects of it. Oduyoye looked to the details of Akan womanhood to explain what her relationship to other cultures should be, and in this case, it ascribed suspicion towards the Christian faith because of its move to suppress women and to suppress African-ness. Akan women would get the brunt of both oppressive objectives.

In accepting the things she could change and refuting those detrimental to her personhood, it is significant to name that Oduyoye was being an archetypal Akan Christian woman. She hosts a complexity that forces us to consider what is being conveyed about her theological stance in her emphasis of not only her Christian identity as her key descriptor, but her Akan identity.

We would do well to notice what the particularity of identity is unveiling for us, especially and including our dangerous tendencies to adjectivize African identity into a modifier or detail of a “more prominent” and more important identifier: Christian identity. Oduyoye’s African identity must stand on its own, must be the most important aspect of who she claims herself to be. When we are cognizant of how formative her African identity is in and on how she forms and names her Christian identity, the shape of her voice within Christian discourse makes sense. Oduyoye is not an African who received Christianity as it was for what it was. She was raised to be a culturally-critical disciple. She describes her background as Christianized-Akan which sits apart from
something like an Akan Christianity. Her Akan identity as the root of who she is orders our considerations of how she is formed as a Christian woman and thinker. In this, we glimpse the dynamism of her identity. Her feminist sensibilities are seen clearest when we keep in mind that her Christian identity was primarily through her father, but her Akan identity embraced through her mother(s). In naming herself as an Akan Christian, Oduyoye is doing identity and identifying work from an African feminist perspective.

**Subverting Birth**

Oduyoye does not adhere to patriarchal machinations. She takes her culture’s strong points, namely its emphasis on a maternal bloodline, and builds an argument towards women’s full inclusion and voice within the culture and the church. She, drawn to the positive message towards Akan women in its matrilineal history and dealings, utilizes matrilineality as a gender-affirmative framework to urge resistance against and re-formation of patriarchal tendencies within Akan culture and the Christian tradition towards a fully inclusive theology expressive of the range of voices, male and female.

She reframes the notion of maternity towards her own uplift and the uplift of women. She centralizes the best of her culture, in its emphasizing the importance and relevance of its women towards the full liberation of Akan and African women. In describing her own emergence as an Akan feminist voice, she cleverly utilizes the

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ontological maternal language of her community employed to describe and in many cases, limit, the purpose and role of its women, and turns it towards liberative means. She claims, “I embody a tension that makes me creative and free, a being that is giving birth to herself from the matrix of a mother-centered community.”47

This mode of existence is a tense one insofar as, in it, she lives within yet exceeds the bounds of her pre-determined Akan woman-ness. Oduyoye employs the notion of creating and creativity in a different way than expected of her. Instead of employing it towards reproductive means, she allows the notion of creativity to become an agent of her service, her own created-ness and coming into being, her own emergence as a theologically relevant voice as an African woman. She describes creativity as embodiment, as something she both mothers and is birthed as. She is both creative agent and created being. In nurturing the bounds of her creativity and freedom, she recognizes women’s divine agency, and pays homage to the best within her culture while addressing its flaws and shortcomings, for in having to birth herself, Oduyoye is pointing to a glaring dilemma in Akan conceptions of womanhood and women’s importance. She clearly identifies the quandary: as a woman she will birth, but she will birth herself first and foremost. In this, she births, differently. It is perceived as wrong for her to “birth herself,” for if she is “birthing herself” or in becoming herself first, she is

not living into her Akan identity well: she is not birthing her own children and growing her own biological family and proliferating the numbers of her people to continue their relevance. She is not putting tradition typically understood, first. Instead, her mode of self-birth is one that opens up possibilities for the empowered stance of her theological standpoint.

What might it mean that an African woman wants to birth herself first, wants to care for herself and be most attentive to her own wants and desires as an expression of the wants and desires of her people? Oduyoye is making the motion to include women (and their interior well-being) in the deepest sense into the Akan cultural and onto-logic. Akan women should be allowed to “birth themselves,” to privilege their own lives as just as critical as if not more important than the cultural drive to procreate. She dares to give Akan women the same footing as its men by expanding the capacities of the physical and spiritual act of African women giving birth. This suggests that much more than ethnic proliferation is happening in the birthing moment, but a certain form of consciousness is taking root, where women can (and should) determine what their bodies mean for their people – for once, and perhaps quite loudly, considering themselves in the number of their people. They are claiming their Akan subjecthood in claiming space in the fold, in the folk.

Oduyoye would describe her embodiment as an Akan woman as riddled with contradiction, but in ways still very close to the heart of Akan cultural precepts. Her
contradiction serves as an interlocutor to the strengths of Akan values. In a community that emphasizes the importance of mothers, Oduyoye’s determination to birth herself proves an uncommon way of thinking for Akan women and the shape of their lives. It grants agency of a different sort while still aligning with the maternal-focused thinking of the Akan people. To think of maternity of the self instead of maternity for others represents a new era of thought for Akan women concerning their place and role within society. It liberates them to consider themselves and their own bodies in different and emancipatory ways; this is consistent with Oduyoye’s objectives. She considers herself a feminist and liberationist theologian, after all!

In Oduyoye’s case, to adhere to some but not all aspects of Akan womanhood is to rattle the foundation of not only her understanding of self, but also who she is in relation to her people, a people who foster relationality in certain ways in order to know themselves as a collective. What happens when she lives into her marriage and her mode of maternity in unexpected ways? To re-visit the question I asked earlier about Oduyoye’s identity, given her emancipatory approach to living, “Is she, in the truest sense, an Akan woman?” In sharpening her voice and living into her desires for herself thus considering women as members of the Akan community as central and imperative, Oduyoye would answer, yes.
Doing African Women’s Theology

Moving moment by moment and joining truths of her ancestry and upbringing, Odunayo’s richly complex theological standpoint and legacy is one of empowerment but fundamentally one of visibility. She has put voice and face to a theological movement of African women’s theological and religious contributions within the larger scope of religious studies and theological studies in particular, and she has done so by allowing African women’s stories and formation to rest at the center of their work. Her work - theological, advocatory, and ecumenical - attends to matters that African theology has failed to adequately address. She believes in the sanctity of women’s voice in the continual growth of the theological canon.

Odunayo brings to light the necessity for women’s voices to be heard equally alongside male voices. The experiences and voices of African women and men differ and hold varying perspectives on reality and truth – they face unique obstacles and can uncover distinctive truths.

Odunayo openly questions what goes into making an African woman, she explores questions and concerns from a demographic who were unable to hear their voices in the theological circuit until the 1970s. She has tilled the soil for women to come after her and plant seeds, reap harvest, and be nourished by the land of theological

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49 Ibid, 22.
and religious truth. As a progenitor of African women’s theology, and African theology from a holistic standpoint, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has created a movement of thought and reflection concerning African culture and Christian tradition. She leaves no stone unturned.

African women’s theology looks to Christian theology’s blind spots and African theology’s missed opportunities in order to make room for itself. With focus in three areas: race, gender, and class challenging Western standpoints, activism and African women’s liberation challenging African theology’s position, and formulating new methods appropriate to the African context speaking back to those who do not have space for them, African women’s theology puts its confluence of womanhood and African identity in full view through its own theological language and emphases. It lays claim on Third-World identity as a means of illumining the contours of their oppressions, including but not limited to economic, political, and religio-cultural affairs. This is the material out of which their liberative stance emerges.

African women’s perspective brings “unique gifts to theology” through story. Such engagements with storytelling such as through narrative theology, the oral tradition, myth and folktales, and novelists draw life and meaning towards new

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theological horizons. With emphases on dogmatic theology, ecumenical movement and reform, and a rootedness in Africa culture, Oduyoye’s theological stance is one of synthesis and creative vision forward. The breadth and depth of her theological work demonstrates that she is pioneer in creating space for African women to have a place in the world, especially within education circles.

African women’s theology emphasizes the power of speech. The tongue of an African woman is important because in its telling stories, it is doing theology. It is uncovering reality and proclaiming what is not yet. It not only unveils viewpoint, but also fortifies a potential range of present and future thought.

How African women do theology means something for the efficacy of theology. How African women see and know God contributes to the extensiveness of how God is known in the world. African women’s theology claims African women important in the sight of God, and God as a just Creator invested in the wellness of the entirety of God’s creation. Oduyoye asserts God as Creator as interested in the just existence of all created beings. She states, “I have in my own theology made the difference between sacrificing and being sacrificed.” She does not assert a God interested in the sacrifice of some for the benefit of others, but a God who moves against human-made hierarchical structures.

Oduyoye views God as one who, through creation, exemplifies and emphasizes God’s own movement in the world.

Let us now move towards considering the starting point from which Oduyoye imagines her liberation and that of the Christian church, through the lens of how she and African women encounter and envision the Creator God.
Chapter Three | Who God Is: Theology, or Words about God

God is imaged as the one who holds the cosmos together in unity.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

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Theological Roots

Who is God and how does one begin to talk about God? What makes God, God? Within the framework of human epistemology and ways of knowing, what constitutes the work of God? What constitutes God-work? God-presence? For Mercy Oduyoye, God exceeds simple category. God is neither male nor female. God is bound to the gender categories of knowing that humans employ in order to signal what social outworking should be. God moves about freely and in the midst God creates the foundations of being. God just is. We are the ones eager to name God through the holy texts of our scriptures, our experiences, our embodied and rational knowledges, our traditions, and our cultures.

But the questions loom larger than sometimes we are cognizant of. To put it another way, the questions we put forth must not be asked of or about God, as much as they should be asked of us and of our knowledge of God.¹ How do we know the breadth

¹ I say this in somewhat a DuBoisian and Fanonian sense. The striving is not only intellectual, but spiritual and material. The striving is towards a type of human being pedestaled as the ultimate form of being.
and depth of God’s being? How can we justify in our theologizing that we are in fact doing it well, that we are in fact heeding rightly to a greater knowledge than ourselves? We theologize in order to “articulate our belief in the divine origin of all that is and its concomitant of the sacredness of being.” We reflect on God’s essence by making meaning of our own existence.

Our first point of reference is ourselves, and in this we only have a limited view and vision. As German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues, we exist in limit and as limited creatures; we learn this limit through each other as God’s created beings. This gives us an indication of how we should consider God – through examining and ruling out who and how God is not within human interaction and activity. In identifying human limit and limitation, aspects of the Creator become clearer.

From analyzing our human condition, we can conclude the following about God: God is Creator. God is divine. We gain this information by understanding our created nature. God is not humanity, though the Creator of such. But, God is also the One who

Where I depart from DuBois and Fanon concerns the striving they suggest culminating in white maleness. I, instead, want to suggest that the striving humanity seeks in its search for God-knowledge is ultimately towards a new mode of physical and material being through spiritual journeying, but its telos is more within the framework of eschatological hope. It concentrates its power in the issuing of new bodies and modes of being that commune with God in a particular way, its ultimate reward extending knowledge of God in the fullest sense that humanity can bear and witness.


joined human being in the person of Jesus Christ. God is the gale movement of holiness in Christian scriptures and in the early and current church inspiring tongues and power and healing. God is Trinitarian, and God is God. God is God in the way God wants to be God. Thus the question circles back to us: how do we know God?

Oduyoye reminds us that we only know God from our locations and through our modes of being; how we know God emerges from who we are as created beings. We hold as truth how God has proclaimed and named God’s self, but we also realize that we each carry within our imaginations contexts that influence our theological outlooks. Who God is is directly linked to who humanity is and how humanity knows itself.4

For Oduyoye, we can only name and know God through our traditions and cultures, through the context of our stories and the memory they hold within them. We can only name God how we know God. Thus, for Oduyoye and other Africans, the natural starting point is to examine what it means to name God as Creator, for through God, being is. Through God’s creation we witness God’s presence in the world. But even with these truths in mind, humanity is prone to mistaken thinking and witness of God. Through this simple naming alone, of naming God as Creator, a world of misinterpretation can be opened up to us.

For many Africans introduced to the Christian faith through colonial missionaries, this misguided interpretation constitutes the introduction of their

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theological standpoints, an introduction they actively wrestle with.\textsuperscript{5} They have to interpret, sit with, and incorporate Western conceptions of the Divine into their former notions of such. They have to construct an African Christian hermeneutic that allows Christianity to make sense to them; and in this, they have to lobby for this standpoint to be valid within universal Christian theological claims.

These hermeneutical misfires and assumptions are battled most by African women; their theological discernment task is more acute than, say, African men, for included within this fight for African theological recognition on the global stage is recognition for their equal createdness and theological input. What’s more, embedded within African women’s fight for recognition is the fundamental theological claim that in God being Creator, God knew what God was doing. Though African male hermeneutics try to assert this as truth through their acts of devaluation towards women, God did not create women in error.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, African women’s invisibilization in theological thought and assigned inferior status within their cultures and church culture at large suggest that the church universal and African church in particular adhere to a

\textsuperscript{5} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christianity and African Culture,” \textit{International Review of Mission}, 01/1995, Volume 84, Issue 332-333, p. 77, especially 80. When utilizing the terminology of “African” here Oduyoye is careful to note that she uses this labeling in relation to her West African experiences, namely of the Asante of Ghana and the Yoruba of Nigeria. We must hold this in tension with the reality that she is speaking from within these experiences, but also beyond them. She is, in some sense, speaking broadly of Africa through the lens of her West African contextual experiences. Both are true and inform her use of “African.” I, too, employ “African” in this chapter to name West African experience as speaking to some if not many or most universal truths of Africans across the continent.

faulty theology. Their theological anthropologies, Christologies, and ecclesiologies all get some things wrong about the church and God’s intention for God’s creation. In the end, they all point to the same problem, misguided suppositions and utilization of the Doctrine of God.

I will move through each of these doctrinal positions throughout this dissertation project from Oduyoye’s standpoint as relevant for the African church and in that, for the church at large. But first, I want to bring to our attention Oduyoye’s point in identifying these places of theological misreading and abuse: doctrinal validity is critical to doing Christian theology well. The efficacy of all doctrines is contingent upon a sound Doctrine of God, the base of our Christian theology. Without this providing the proper covering, our doctrinal epistemologies are misguided. For example, even the simple notion of granting God both genders in our describing God proposes a principle about God that Christians must grasp: God exceeds our representations of God. God exceeds our understanding of God, thus our labelings do not fit God the same way they fit us; they merely uncover glimpses of how our knowledge could possibly yield divine learning. Though represented as gendered in re-tellings, when considering the vastness of God (especially in the various names of God), traditionally, most Africans would not claim God particularly gendered as critical to their theology.\(^7\)

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Buried underneath a Christian theology of God is the manner in which God is known or introduced newly to Africans. This is the crux of how God is known for many in modern day Africa; God is attached to the memory of colonialism. For Oduyoye, this proves integral to exploring African’s and African women’s conception of God. This chapter touches on African conception God through highlighting how God is perceived and received in African cultural understanding. I examine Oduyoye’s articulations and examination of Africans’ colonial conception of God and their subsequent response of creating a particularized African Christianity towards the belief and practice of the wellness of all Africans.

In this chapter I overview Oduyoye’s work to highlight and interrogate African relationality to colonial imaging of God. Oduyoye first examines how Western Christianity proposed an incomplete picture of God and thus theology to Africans through the nature of their colonial missionizing efforts. She recalls that African cosmology holds truths about God that Christianity can acknowledge and learn from. Later, she tackles the problems internal to African theology where it adopts a pseudo- or neo-colonial mentality that African religious foundations must be replaced with European ones. But the resistance to this colonial logic exercised in African conceptions of the cosmos, is strong, even if subtly so - the most devoted and assimilated African Christians still hold to aspects of their culture in Christian expression. Oduyoye signals that Africans’ reluctance to completely forgo their culture suggests that a syncretic
African Christianity is Africa’s truest expression of Christianity, even if syncretism is not conceptually popular to and amongst some Africans. Lastly, she reminds us of the ability to know God in fuller ways even in God’s typical gendered labeling. She argues that the most complete understanding of God’s nature can only be known if voices, like African women’s, are heard equally alongside those doing important theological work. Oduyoye shows us that both African’s cultural disregard and attachment to gender are intertwined with colonial conception of superiority and inferiority.

Oduyoye’s work, throughout, aptly frames the questions of African’s, including African women’s, understanding of God in light of what their bodies have been made to mean for the movement of God on their behalf. She ultimately turns towards and holds fast to the pivotal African position of God as concerned about the well-being of God’s creation for the foundation of her and many others’ expression of a Doctrine of God.

**Black God, White God: Reflections on the Missionary Impact of God in Africa**

For Africans, the God-message sent through colonial evangelism was puzzling; but it was received. It would be inaccurate to name the African response to missionizing work as pure rejection on the one hand or blind acceptance on the other. The reaction rested somewhere between the two, in some instances leaning stronger in one direction than the other.

God, syphoned through Christian missionary efforts and colonial encounter, expanded Africans’ religious framework, but even in this they wrestled with the culture
that accompanied it. Africans learned about the God of the Europeans, but they also
learned about the god-complex of the European.⁸ ⁹ European missionaries aimed for the
total spiritual, psychological, and cultural conversion of Africans towards European
ways of life. This was noticed and rejected by some Africans, and accepted by others;
but, the God of the Europeans was contemplated and given space within the African
religious imagination. The God purported by Europeans was a wonder for Africans,
thus the actual consideration of God as a religious entity was not primarily a place of
discord or tension. The people who accompanied the message proved the ones
complicated and perplexing. Their “Western Christian attitudes” asserted a logic of
dominance and operated with a sense of paternalism¹⁰ over and against their African
counterparts.¹¹

Africans understand God to be multifarious, to contain various aspects of divine
wisdom and grace. In the African consciousness, God is a figure deeply revered who is
widely and differently known. God manifests to people according to their culture and
tradition, thus it did not seem out of the ordinary to Africans that God would exist in

493-504, especially 498. Oduyoye fleshes this out more in her analysis of “God in the apartheid system” of
South Africa.
⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic
Press, 2001), 43.
¹⁰ Though Oduyoye interestingly calls them “mother churches” to describe their generational impact in the
thought-life and ecclesial practice of African Christianity, it is often recounted that some missionary-
inspired churches held a paternalistic attitude towards the Africans it was trying to convert.
¹¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church to Account,” The Ecumenical Review, 10/1995, Volume 47,
Issue 4, pp. 479–489, especially 479.
this particular way to the Europeans missionaries. In this, Africans were aware that God could take many different forms and could be something different for different people. This reality would not be any different with the Christian encounter. God’s expression as Creator through African cosmology could exist in tandem with the “biblical theology of creation that identifies Jesus Christ as the wisdom and word of creation.”\textsuperscript{12}

The African conception of the Christian God was formed in the crucible of belief and doubt, and of words constructing altars towards both. This belief was formed at the intersection of a God already known and a God that Africans were being encouraged to not only know, but to allow to become their God, too. Oduyoye suggests that this Christian evangelistic objective would not have been an impossible task. Though resisted at points, since the religious was already so infused in African ways of life, the notion of a Christian God did not seem too farfetched for Africans to be open to. Africans would be open to hearing more from these Europeans about their God,\textsuperscript{13} as God could very well be a realistic figure within that respective culture. The similarities between their own cosmology and that of Christianity also intrigued many Africans. While African religion was founded on the creative abilities of a Supreme Being,


\textsuperscript{13} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa} (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 36.
Christianity, in similar ways, originated in the creative/creating speech of God over the face of the deep.\textsuperscript{14}

For Africans, creative words are the means through which God was known, is known, and is to be known. Proverbs, myths, and stories of their peoples fortify the essence of the Divine as actively part of humanity’s purpose.\textsuperscript{15} God involves God’s self in human existence, thus human being can only be known through religious reflection.

“Nothing and no situation is without God,” Oduyoye asserts.\textsuperscript{16} In African contexts then, conceptions of the self are only known through some conception of and interaction with notions of divinity. This is why Christianity stood out; it proved a curious evangelistic effort – it was not too far off from the religious mentality that already guided how Africans comprehended their own ways of life, and how they understood the self and others. For Africans, the combination of their religious pre-existence with this new religious angle proved fertile ground in which notions of God, the Divine, the Creator and Supreme Being could be welcomed into their cosmological thought (even though coming into their religious consideration from a different perspective). The Supreme Being lauded in many African cultures seemed a lot like the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Ibid, 90.
\end{footnotes}
Christian God, thus the Christian God would be considered and eventually allowed into the life of African peoples.

This was a signal of the openness of African culture as opposed to the closed off nature and superiority-complexed European culture of Christian missions. Missionaries claimed God’s authority in their evangelistic work; Africans recognized the disconnect and oddness of encounter immediately through the missionary’s questionable actions. Africans primarily understood God’s authority in action that moved towards the unification of people. It was not demonstrated in lording power over another. Missionary evangelism sought unification, but of a domineering sort – this signaled the point of departure between the holy mission of evangelism and the aspiration to exert control and supremacy.

Africans understood the complexity of religious systems, as the culture of many Africans had embedded within it a complex understanding of the Divine and how divinity manifested in the material world. The religious was not something that Africans had to be taught to include in their everyday lives, but was already inherent in their physical existence. Within many African cultures, the material and physical world were already in direct relationship with the spiritual realm. God was already and always

\[Ibid, 498.\]
amidst and amongst all things. Africans, then, had a keen sense of divine and human workings.

The general sentiment of African hospitality towards this Christian expression of God and faith held detrimental results for some. Though African culture allowed space for complexity of religious expression, the Western worldview had no intention of adding African’s religious thought to their own thought-world, but instead moved to replace African worldview with their own. This became an issue. European missions were most interested in pushing their cultural expression of God onto the Africans they encountered. And in this action, Western Christian culture - not necessarily Christianity as a faith practice - claimed itself superior to African religious culture. This proved detrimental in the long run for African cultural and communal practice, as Africans had to work to keep its culture relevant to and within their Christian religious expression. They clamped down on certain aspects of their culture (and thus their personhood), letting go of others. Overall, this culture crisis generally disrupted the universal African message of communal wholeness and uplift.

To be fair, Christian contact did not solely create new problems for African societies. In some instances, it merely made pre-existing relational problems more pronounced. Christian religious attempts at African cultural reframing not only reinforced notions in hierarchical structures already present within African systems of

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18 Ibid, 494.
sociality, but also opened the door for African men to experience the unjust treatment and invisibility that many African women had already been subject to. Overall, the prospect of superiority (reinforced through colonial iteration) bred dangerous ideology towards the treatment of Africans, but especially towards African women.19

**Is God African? Toward an African Christianity**

The impact of missionary Christianity and its troubling evangelizing method on the one hand and intriguing message on the other, provided space for imaginative possibility of this God for many Africans - but not first without their parsing out the untruths that the demeaning missionizing effort purported.

For many Africans the missionary’s religious imagination was narrow. The missional objectives aspired to push out African cosmological thought in order to replace it with a Euro-centric one.20 21 This new way of knowing God and the culture that accompanied it limited and tried to eliminate African traditional religious culture through labeling it demonic and opposite the Christian message.

Unfortunately, many Africans who were converted wrestled with the colonial logic that asserted their culture as in need of correction. Many still assert this today. Many do not trust their histories; they, instead, believe the falsehood that the essence of

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20 Ibid, 80.
their being as a people is one positioned in religious backwardness at best, and demonic activity, at worst. They actively wrestle with Africa’s seeming misalignment with appropriate biblical, spiritual, and Christian ways of being.

For many Africans, rejecting their own culture in favor of “right” Christian alignment, suggests that a relevance of one’s personhood as expressed within their culture can be reduced, erased, and even inverted, made to turn against itself, and further made to turn against other African peoples and traditions.22 This problem of African’s lack of impact on Christianity Oduyoye names a troubling dilemma within African thought. The impact and efficacy of African culture as a sound and right cultural entity in itself is in jeopardy. I want to further suggest that the fear found in African desire for “proper” Christian expression builds a barrier between true African being and Christian being. The former is expressed as opposite the latter, not encompassed within it. Within a European-preferential framework the notion of a proper Christian culture speaks to a harmful colonial psychic infiltration and its impact in cementing a Western Christian logic in the place of African thought. Africans are being taught to doubt themselves, to hate their culture, and to reject their religious foundation.23

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22 Ibid, 127. In Nigeria, this looked like a missional instantiation of the “good.” The Church Missionary Society, an evangelistic arm in Nigeria, their formula to “make the country good” consisted of three “C’s”: Christianity, civilization and commerce.
23 Many argue that this follows the biblical mandate to forsake one’s gods for the true God, but where this logic fails is in it consideration that Africans already know the true God through their religious means. What logic might respond to this if this is the case? Africans are being called to reject the true God for a European iteration of the true God. Africans are being taught not who the true God is but that the lens through which they can only know God is a Euro-centric one. Africans are falling prey to a European
A missionary Christianity often emphasized not only the benefit of the Christian faith framed within European ways of life, but constantly illumined what they perceived to be the problems of African traditional life and thus of African life as whole. This was the entrance point, the beginning, for many Africans encountering Christianity – learning that everything they practiced, everything that they were, was actually a wrong mode of human-being.24 It needed to be corrected by being forgotten. Christianity, in this sense, sought and fought to re-produce Euro-centric understandings of God and God’s creation, the human creature in relation to God and to other creatures.

This was difficult for many Africans to accept as the sole truth of the cosmos. We see that the women in Oduyoye’s life held this skepticism very close in their refusal to wholly accept the Christian faith given them. These women were not so willing to forgo their culture for another that they did not fully agree with. For many peoples already holding a pre-existent cosmology and belief system within it, the idea of the faith tradition that accompanied the Christian God was met with points of resistance,

moments of acceptance and, later, a strange combination of both.\textsuperscript{25} This space of ambiguity would impact the viewpoint for many Africans in this new consideration of the Supreme Being central to this faith practice called Christianity.

For many Africans, Christianity’s taking root in Africa after repeated missionary introduction threw African cultural existence into question. Africans live their culture. They live their religion. African’s ways of life, and thus Africans themselves, cannot be thrown out as an ideology or viewpoint alone. It is not ideology or a manner of thought, but a way of being. Rooted within this way of being is an existentially connected viewpoint to the cosmos and the religious.

Oduyoye reminds us that Africans, like many other peoples, already had a religion and an understanding of God,\textsuperscript{26} and in this had culturally, socially, economically, and religiously thrived well before colonial encounter. The pre-existent African ways of life were not to be ignored – to do so would offer a limited historical view. To only know Africans and Africa through the Christian narrative is to ignore the historical richness of the continent before Christian missionary encounters. Missionaries did not create Africans; they, however did introduce faulty perceptions of Africans to the rest of the world.


\textsuperscript{26} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” \textit{Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life}, 01/1997, Volume 47, Issue 4, p. 493-504, especially 494. Oduyoye quotes her teacher and mentor, Professor E. Bolaji Idowu’s drawing on a Tanzanian proverb, “as people everywhere see the sun, so they all have the one God.”
Africa did not spring into being once Christians “discovered” them; they had always been. In the same vein, Oduyoye reminds us that African traditional religion did not appear once Europeans acknowledged its existence. Africans already had a system of cosmological belief that guided the movement of their everyday life. Africans already knew God. Christianity was merely giving this God a different voice and different story – but this God was already known among the Akan, among those in Ghana, to many in West Africa, and all over the African continent.

Between the Christian encounter and the subsequent development of African Christian life, is the formational, formed, and informed understanding of the Divine. If Africans would be recipients of the Christian faith, they would have to put their indelible mark on their Christian expression, but they would first need to build an understanding of God that rung true. The making of this African Christianity is something that would need to be developed over time. Though some take to a Western manifestation of Christianity, many are advocating and making space for an Africanized Christianity.27 Faced with the question if Christianity could in fact be a true African religion,28 Oduyoye marks the divide between a Christianity that can be trusted (which Africans determine) and a Christianity that is merely inherited (accepted from the West

27 Ibid, 498. Oduyoye asserts that African Institutes Churches are an institution doing the great work of encouraging African aspects into Christian practice, including re-establishing African language about God into African Christian vocabulary.
as the true expression of Christian faith). She resists the frightening reality that the colonizing reach of Christianity engrained a mentality where “it was acceptable to have Christianity transform Africa and Africans,” but where it was most “difficult to allow the possibility of Africans [to] have something to offer to transform Christianity in Africa.”

For the African accepting the Christian faith meant that their structures of thought would be challenged, re-arranged, and broadened. The Christian faith would add a dimension of complexity, would add another story, to the spiritual archives of the African cosmology. It would require many Africans to expand their theological imagination.

The merger of religious standpoints would introduce the difficult question: what should African Christianity look like? Should the emphasis still include cultural, economic, and racist mishaps? Does being an African Christian mean forgoing one’s cultural roots for a new “religio-cultural ancestry” found in Christian scripture? Or can a more complex and rich means of religion and culture integrate itself into the African way of life? For Oduyoye, integration of Christian theological values that enhance the wisdom already found in African religious culture is most promising. What is needed,

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29 Ibid.
Oduyoye asserts, “is a theology that will enable Africans to become more conscious of the fact that life is lived in the presence of God and in full view of a spirit world that is in constant communion with our dimension of life.” In other words, Christianity should not be a religious replacement, but a welcome addition and enrichment of the precepts Africans believe God has already gifted them within their culture.

**Africans and Gendering God**

For Oduyoye the question that is of most interest to her is not necessarily: “Who is God?” but more so, “What is God?” To some, the question in itself offends; it brings to the fore the problem that many Africans wrestle with and struggle to move past when it comes to learning and accepting the depth of God’s identity: gender. Addressing gender through theology runs up against particular logics that hurts many.

Asking, “What is God?” opens us up to question, “does a gendered understanding of God positively impact the Christian church?” towards the larger question, “does gender matter in the large scheme of human involvement in the will and action of God in the world?” Ultimately, the last question guides the first. In a world where the dominant mentality wins out, when the purpose of human involvement in the world comes into the question, the response gravitates towards figuring out how to substantiate existence. And the only way that some can do so is through asserting a

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32 Ibid.
theo-logic of justification: if God is described as one particular gender, then the existence of those of that same gender, matters and matters most. This approach signals a war of hierarchical ideologies instead of collective thoughtful questioning that moves to liberate humanity’s understanding of God from such limited delineations in the first place. Thus, to speak of God differently and diversely, not only in language, but also in the meaning behind the language, places pressure upon the maleness of Christian theology as an enterprise and the patriarchal presuppositions that have determined the shape and function of gendered relationality. What gender has come to mean in the practice of human living and subsequently in constructions of the Divine (and thus the reinforcement of such human relationality) must be stripped of its power and wrong usage.

Oduyoye asserts a controversial point in African cosmological thought: for Africans, God’s being is one that exceeds gendered labeling as the most important or defining feature of God. African religious thought isn’t deeply concerned with gendering God in any way. African worldview thinks gender together. “If anything,” Oduyoye argues, “the African mind contains an image of a motherly Father or a fatherly Mother as the Source of Being.”

parent, the grandparent, Nana, a source of loving-kindness, and protection.”

God, in this way, can be experienced through either the notion of motherhood or fatherhood. To read this specification of God’s aspects in anthropomorphic terms is more the tradition of Western Christianity. The gendered understandings of God have less to do with God and more to do with particular cultural conceptions of what they need or want the divine to be, to look like. The composition of who God is for all people points back to who they need God to be in light of their reality.

“In the Source Being, there is no question of male preceding female…” Oduyoye notes. Africans do not need to consider God in a gendered manner, because God’s action in the world exceeds the relevance of God’s gender. God is not God because God is male or female, but rather male and female are categories of designation because God is God. God does not exist to be male or female, but works to guide humanity in the details of their lives.

This, then, explains why many Africans, including African women, have no problem with the language of the fatherhood of God being a prominent feature in

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37 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 48. Some African women ascribe the title of “Mother” to God in order to illumine God’s nurturing attributes. What is also apparent in this practice is an affirmation of African women in the expectation that they fulfill the role of being mother themselves. It asserts the inter-relationship of God’s creation towards one another.
expressing God’s relationship to God’s creation. The fatherhood of God is not a
hindrance because it is description and not coronation. It does not operate as a means to
justify privilege for males, but works purely as a naming feature – and a naming feature
that boasts inclusivity.

To think “Father” as label in itself or alone suggests a contradiction; a father is so
because of a mother. Oduyoye notes that the title of “father” is incomplete in itself.

“Fatherhood” only is in relation to “Motherhood.” Since fatherhood is typically balanced
out by motherhood, when God is understood in such terms, what is being suggested is a
fuller view of human being, and not a reductionist view of a gendered God. The
maternal must always be directly assumed with the paternal; the female must be assumed
with the male; the woman must be assumed with the man.39 Paternal labelings for God
are not emphasizing superiority but a joint-ness. Humans can only express God through
human terminology, as working attempts to understand God in name, to understand
God’s nature. For Africans, to assume God as “father” is to assume God as “mother” as
well.40

39 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa
(Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 95.
40 In explaining this logic, I want to name that I in no way support these labels as best to conceive of how
humanity would name itself. I recognize that the labeling of “father” and “mother,” even with human
designation, can act harmfully. It assumes many things, including the fertility of women and men and that
they come from a culture with that bodily understanding. Oduyoye’s use of “fatherhood” and
“motherhood” is solely a means to express how God is referred within various West African cultures.
Oduyoye even goes so far as to name gender as a theological non-issue, as it does not do the work that it does elsewhere when referring to Christ as male. Similar to her logic with naming God, women are not excluded from consideration when Christ is mentioned; they are assumed to be included in the work that he is doing in the world. This, in a sense, suggests that the being of Christ and the work of Christ are inseparable. The emphasis is not necessarily about which gender Christ embodied, but about who received the grace that his presence in the world generated. This logic can be applicable to God as well – the gender of God is rendered most insignificant in comparison to the reach of God’s presence. God presented as Father does not make a statement of male superiority, but illumines the relationality of such a role – that God’s children are known, provided for, and protected no matter if the label of father or mother is invoked.

Oduyoye notes the slippery slope evident with such thinking about the utility of gender classification and assuming its effects differently: if used with the wrong intention it can quickly become an exercise in gender hierarchy. Oduyoye’s work reveals to us, then, that the problem emerges when the role(s) of the Divine become confused with the designation of the Divine’s creation. When men in ministry and within the church at large begin to assume that the maleness working in describing God and Jesus apply to them and assume more influence, the spiritual and comforting power behind the roles of these titles become lost; but most significantly the importance of the rest of

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humanity becomes diminished and even irrelevant. The female inclusion that should automatically accompany designations of fatherhood or maleness is diminished. The point of the male designation is not the uplift of one gender over another, but to invoke the presence of the whole unified human self – its femaleness as well as its maleness. To misunderstand and abuse this fundamental conclusion leaves the door open for patriarchal designations of God to undergird theological claims.

According to Oduyoye’s logic, the point of naming God in the paternal parental role and Christ in his biological designation as male is to signal the need for an interconnected understanding of gender(ed) expression. If considered inversely as Oduyoye wisely argues, the motherhood of God and of Christ, would not provoke hierarchical understanding, but invoke the fullness of humanity. “Mother” is known through its counterpart of “Father.” In our patterns of thought, if one is named, the other is assumed as existent. This logic does not let us forget that whether the label for God is “Father” or “he,” both descriptors are invoked in the fullness of pairing and partnership. “Father” incites “mother”; “he” must invoke “she.” Unfortunately, since this rationale is not carefully attended to within many Christian churches, at the very least, the exclusivist masculine language of God must be continually discussed, debated and clarified.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
In a similar vein, within a harmful masculinist logic are attributes that humanity has attributed to God which can negatively affect women. The language many Christians use to positively and powerfully describe and categorize God, such as God’s omnipresence, omniscience, rule and power, can be used to reinforce various logics of dominance on racial and sexual scales. This cannot be; God must be known, otherwise. The church must create a theology and theological language that considers “justice in human relations...” In this, it participates in God’s creative plan for the world. The church must prioritize full recognition and equal treatment of all of its members, and begin so through utterances of God that illumine the divine aspects of the Creator, that are not expropriated by humanity to invoke disparate meaning. Divine language must not be erroneously appropriated.

**Is God for the Many?**

So how do Africans know the Christian God? The trajectory of Oduyoye’s work suggests that a Trinitarian outlook can best attend to the details of who God is. It grants Africans the fullest picture of this potent deity. She suggests that God is known in fullness once we consider the mission of Christ. Through centering Jesus Christ, we gain

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43 Ibid, 483.
understanding of God’s intention for the world through clarity the Spirit grants us.\textsuperscript{46}

Through a pneumatological Christology, Oduyoye argues Christ as the demonstration of God’s love and presence in the world. He is the bringer of the good news. It is through examining God’s action within scripture and history and in carefully discerning the spirit-inspired lessons and actions of Jesus Christ for his followers that Africans can best grasp and experience the total movement and presence of the Creator God. God is best known through God’s various expressions of God’s self.

For Africans, God is primarily known as Creator, as the Supreme Being, as the one who guides and guards the currents of living. God is known as the determinant and sustainer of life. The Creator does not create beings in order to harm them in this life, but to guide them through it. Thus, for many Africans, life’s difficulties suggest misfortune brought about by human intention, divine workings (whether by the Supreme Being or other forces), or a combination of both.

Africans are not accustomed to the divine working against some for the wellness of others, thus for some Africans the effects of colonialism are often attributed to greedy human ambition in some instances, and in others, God’s divine working to grant knowledge of God’s power that would be otherwise unknown. The privilege of Europeans proves discouraging for many, but Africans trust the ultimate purpose and goodness of God to show them favor and work things out for their good.

Stories are unique vehicles through which Africans can glimpse the action of God as God can be better understood through them. What theology has taught Africans about God through Christian scripture often emphasized God’s powerful attributes, but makes little mention of the more perplexing ones. African theology rightly turns to and moves to discern these attributes and actions in order to gain the fullest picture of the God “given” to them.

For African women especially, story conveys difficult truths. The creation stories in African traditions that honor men over women and by hermeneutical default the God present in Christian scripture and God’s subsequent actions, can seem contrasting, and even unfair. Thus, attention to the principles of the faith is critical. Women are called to take biblical texts seriously within their own theological explorations and assertions in naming God. They must take part in the scriptural parsing of God’s dealings from that of men. Scripture, like experience, is a source of discerning the Divine, therefore it must be de-coded and rightly applied. The message of God as liberator and the one who brings about transformation from death towards life must be extrapolated from it.\textsuperscript{47}

But Africans are not unaware of accounts of God that suggest a different relationship to God and the good things God grants. Oduyoye approaches questions of God’s providence in a manner similar to some in the liberation theological tradition and womanist theological standpoint. For African women, experiencing God is not pain-free, 

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 49-50.
but rather, can be painful. This is demonstrated most clearly through God’s action in the world in light of the conditions of women. Africans recognize this in relation to God, especially within the narratives of Christian scripture. Through this means of story and account, Africans learn the extensiveness of God’s will as well as where God’s action is indecipherable or unclear.

African theology recognizes these tensions within scripture as the guide to seeing God more complexly. In the Old Testament, God is positioned as a powerful and violence-approving deity. The providence of God comes into question when a God who sees all of creation appears to allow, and even demand, creation to incite harm on another. Oduyoye points out, much like voices within American Indian theology, that the God of the exodus is also the God who “deprived the Caananites [sic] of the land on which they lived.”

For Oduyoye logically, according to a hermeneutic that praises this imaging of God, God would also condone the actions and consequences of apartheid in South Africa. This God-inspired action “subtly informs the pillage of Africa by Euro-American peoples and their descendants in other parts of the world.”

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move suggests that this God supports the pillage of others in order to lift up those
deemed chosen, chosen-ness in this case signaled by violent theft of the land important
to the identity of the peoples living in and on it.51 This God appears to be a colonial God
approving, or rather commanding, colonialism through the notion of chosen-ness. If
God has chosen the victor, where does this leave the victim? Oduyoye asks an important
question regarding this hermeneutical logic and acceptance of holy ferocity: can this
God be on the same side of Africans?

These and other theodical questions and circumstances inform the imaginations
of many Africans about Divine rationale. In many African contexts, God is given the
benefit of the doubt, but is not absolved from involvement in the presence of adversity.
Many Africans believe that ill-fortune is not the result of God’s action, but is the result of
evil (evil that God allows, but not God’s evil, nonetheless). For Oduyoye, African
conception of God’s overall goodness comes into tension with the Christian scriptural
references in the Old Testament of a God who, in choosing Israel, seems to be
commanding the destruction of the Canaanites. Though some Africans believe that good
and evil can come “from” God, the ultimate sentiment is that God “demonstrates

51 The Hebraic understanding of “chosenness” that is used and designated by God’s self does not translate
to the African cultural notion of “God’s favor” or granting of good fortune. This train of thought might
explain the points of confusion I mention a bit later on addressing from whence chosenness comes? Can it
extend beyond Israel alone? And if it extends into the entire church, does this chosenness (and particular
expression of favor) reach both the colonizer and the colonized peoples? If so, what is being said in the
colonizer seemingly receiving the most favor? Are they coronated as the new chosen people?
concern” to those who “suffer through evil not of their doing.” The ultimate understanding is that if God does in fact allow something harmful, God will provide relief. God is not unconcerned with God’s creation, but guides creation towards good ends through various means.

Given this tension of God’s action on God’s creation, I assert the contrast is substantial. If God is not the author of bad things placed onto people, or at the very least will assuage the situation, how are Africans to think of the colonial premise of God’s commands in Christian scripture? Might the relief of such a situation be in the opportunity for Africans to learn of God in a particular way through a particular people? Is Christian conversion the “good” thing for Africans within the colonial situation? Is this not a re-inscribing of the same missionary logic that Africans are cautious of?

It is clear that questions of God’s providence and theodicy are only answered partially through the weighted logic of God’s goodness. The conception of the goodness of God reaches far and wide, but it still does not attend to what Africa’s history with oppression teaches Africans about God’s plans and purpose for humanity. What are Africans to do, how are Africans to learn how to be in light of their conditions? How

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52 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, 01/1997, Volume 47, Issue 4, p. 493-504, especially 497. In naming evil as coming “from” God, the language utilized emphasizes more so God “using” evil is a means to bring someone to a place of spiritual, physical, psychological, or emotional enlightenment. Thus, the evil is a vehicle through which God’s good plan is ultimately carried out. In this, even through the utilization of evil, God’s goodness is still most important and most prevalent in African thought.
might Africans better understand the intention of God for them? For many, there is a deliberate turn to Christology to explain such contrasts as it best embodies an answer to God’s mysterious workings and, ultimately, demonstrates healing intent.

Jesus is the good intention of God for humanity; Jesus is whom humanity can look to to know God’s love for God’s creation. Oduyoye suggests Christ is appealing to many Africans because his missional desire was to bring healing and wholeness, but to do so wisely, practically, and with conviction. For Oduyoye “the themes of salvation, liberation, transformation, and reconstruction are all passed through the prism of the Jesus story.”53 Jesus is the one who introduces the world to these means of true life through and in the human condition. God enfleshed demonstrates not only the power of God through his ministry on earth, but also re-asserts Emmanuel, God with us.54 Jesus pronounced the ability to know and experience God through his lived action and ministerial works on the earth.55 For Africans, this signals a God who is not complacent with the suffering of God’s creation. God demonstrates, in the precepts and life of Jesus Christ, that God knows humanity intricately and cares for her fiercely. The consolation is in knowing, God is with us.

54 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 10. “God with us” is remembered for many Africans through the exodus. Both God’s salvific and liberative action are expressed in the events and premise of the exodus, of freedom from a place of bondage to that of freedom and free will.
A God of Life: How Africans Know God

Oduyoye joins Christian understandings of God to the tenants of African religion to inspire a train of thought that illumines the complexity of God but that, in the end, names the will of God as good towards God’s creation. Despite their historical experiences, Africans, in line with black theology “had to debunk the underlying theory that God is partial and favored the white race and subjected the black race to servitude under them.”\textsuperscript{56} She notes that a “fresh profile of God was needed to heighten the experience of God as compassionate and just.”\textsuperscript{57} God seen and known from a different angle is precisely the God Africans need. For Africans, God as life, Creator, and freedom is most important.

God is linked to life as God the Creator. To know God is to know life. God is the One who infuses all that humanity knows with vitality. Oduyoye claims God as the foundation of life; it is only through the life of God that humanity can continue living.\textsuperscript{58} Being a community of life with God requires full trust in God.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” \textit{Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life}, 01/1997, Volume 47, Issue 4, p. 493-504, especially 498. Oduyoye uses “black theology” ambiguously, here. She might be speaking of the religious critical-constructive tradition founded by James Cone, the theological conclusions of an apartheid South Africa that she speaks to in leading directly into this claim, or she can be making reference to a combination of both.


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 495.

The names of God found in symbols, myths, proverbs, cultural stories, and sayings pronounce a God of life: a God of creation. The language that is used to name, describe, and summon God offers a picture of how Africans experience God. God is hope and foundation. God is comrade and friend. These words reinforce the multifarious ways Africans not only have experienced God, but also lend space for them to express varied knowledges of God. It grants African speech flexibility and space to name God inter-personally as well as communally.

For Africans, God is known as the “sole creator and sustainer of all things.” God is the beginning, the middle and the end of life; all things move through God. God is implicated in all that exists, including relationality. Humanity leads a theocentric existence. God is the author of relationship. Human beings are God’s children; and together should love and respect the earth.

Odutuyoe adopts the language of her theological counterpart and EATWOT colleague, James Cone, when she claims Africa’s experience of God is not only of

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60 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, 01/1997, Volume 47, Issue 4, p. 493-504, especially 495. Oduyoye briefly describes the naming work that particular symbols in Akan culture do. One such example she uses is that of Adinkra symbols whose star detail “says,” “Like the star, I depend on God and not on myself.” This symbolism “speaks” to God being reliant and dependable.
61 Ibid. Oduyoye suggests that African religion researchers, such as G. Parrinder, E.B. Idowu, and J.S. Mbiti offer a more extensive look into African names for God.
63 Ibid., 44-45.
calamity, but of recognition. God sees all of God’s creation. “The African experience of God is that ultimately God is on the side of justice.” For Oduyoye, God takes sides; and the side that God is on is that of the oppressed. God seeks the liberation of God’s people from marginalizing conditions, and engages this action in the person of Jesus Christ. African theological foundation is not too far from the black theological standpoint of the United States.

Much like the Europeans who needed God to be God in particular ways for their missional ambitions, Africans know God specifically as one of compassion and love. They know God as healer and companion. Even amidst the evil done to various peoples, including Africans, God does not abandon God’s people. God liberating Africans out from under oppressive European colonial regimes position God to be known as the arbiter of freedom. God calls humanity out of oppression “into wholeness of life.”

For African women, oppression was not only applicable to colonial rule, but also manifested in gender discrimination and violence. For African women God is liberation, and not only on a surface level, but in the trenches of African cultural practice as well. Oduyoye insists that if action is to be called liberative for humanity, it automatically

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65 Ibid, 497.
68 Ibid, 499.
must include the voice and perspective of women. In Africa, this is no different.\textsuperscript{69} African theology has punished its women too long by pushing their voices to the margins and instead vying for a masculinist and male-privileging theological standpoint. Gender should not be as powerfully repressive as it has been. If gender is not singularly male and ultimately does not define God’s worthiness, why does it define the worth and value of God’s image, of God’s creation?\textsuperscript{70} It is time for women to experience God differently instead of surrendering to and suffering under the deification of man. Oduyoye draws connection with women asserting them as creation, too, and as part of the church with a proper understanding of God. In claiming their humanity and voice, African women claim God as outside the bounds of limited imagination. African women claim God, as well.

Oduyoye reminds us of God’s interconnectedness with Jesus. Jesus Christ is the expression of God’s love for the entirety of humanity, without caveat. He is a liberating force “affirming the goodness of the sexuality in women” instead of asserting it is the focal point for their discrimination.\textsuperscript{71} Jesus lives in the world opposite a masculinist vision of God. Jesus, as God enfleshed, shows God as compassionate, caring, loving, and most important, fully aware of the circumstances of God’s creation. This is prophetic

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
work. Jesus not only speaks prophetically, but acts as such in his full inclusion in the vision and in-breaking of the kin-dom of God, to borrow from fellow liberation advocate Ada María Isasi-Díaz. Jesus welcomes all into the household of God, and claims all of God’s children as significant – for they are the ones who bear God’s image. All humanity has the markings of God’s intent and purpose.

For African women, this affirmation is salvation. This is the freedom that saves - God for us, God (in solidarity and in movement) with us. God for and with Africa, Christ for and with Africa. For Oduyoye, this solidarity claim contains a message to the African church about its practices and its reach: it cannot and will not be the body of Christ without its women. Women are Africa; women are the church. Women, too, are Christ’s hands and feet in the world. Now we will turn to take a closer look at how Oduyoye asserts this claim as true, through her communal and careful look at who Christ is for African women.

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Chapter Four | Who is Christ for the African Woman?: Christology as Storied Word

For many women who go to church, Christ the Word comes as a story.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Beginnings

Words are the place from whence knowledge of Jesus Christ begins. Sunday school words, words echoed across podiums and pulpits, on street corners, in living rooms and elsewhere tell the story of what words about the divine Word mean for Christians and their pathways of discipleship. Where we encounter words and from whom we encounter words signal and suggest a pedagogical relationship to them; words teach us something, and they do so in broad and narrow, spatially and specific, ways. They teach divine precept and moral principle, unearth the truth of divine and ordinary encounter. Words and stories “as human constructs of experience, are the places where doctrine and life meet.”

For this reason Mercy Oduyoye does not consider the Christological in the customary sense. Jesus Christ is too intertwined in lived experience to not be spoken of

on personal and communal levels, especially given African women’s knowledge of him. For Oduyoye, Christ can be best understood through African women’s experiences of him. He is in the “everyday experiences of the women of Africa.” This demonstrates the unique connection between words about Jesus and word about Jesus. How people know Jesus in their particularity, matters. He is in the words of the church, including those of African women. He is in the story of healing and solidarity; he is present in moments of liberation. He is in what the church and what the people say about him; and included in the church are women. Oduyoye wants us to pay close attention to this. She claims, if Jesus is the church’s word and women are the church too, then Jesus must be in women’s words.

In this chapter, examining Jesus historically and through the lens of African women, I explore how Oduyoye seeks to answer who Jesus Christ is for African women.

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3 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ” from *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, Eds. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 155. Though Oduyoye is clear to note that African women refer to and know him as “Jesus” and not “Jesus the Christ” or “Christ” or “Christ Jesus” I use them interchangeably throughout this chapter to designate how the more personal and relational figure, “Jesus” is not distinct from the salvific and Messianic one, “the Christ.” In using “Jesus” and “the/Christ” synonymously, I am arguing that the salvific is happening within the intimate and vice versa. I want to suggest that for African women and their articulations of Jesus Christ, both are working within one another: the personal figure is the salvific in his relationality and relational emphases. The Messianic figure is deeply personal and intimately known in his ability to provide relief, redemption and liberation whether on an institutional or personal scale. Teresa Hinga also argues for a “pneumatic Christology” that sees Christ as deeply intertwined with how the church knows the Holy Spirit; given the impact of African Traditional Religion on Africans, this proves unsurprising. Therefore, Jesus Christ working in all these ways: in the interpersonal, in the salvific, and in spiritual movement is who I make mention of in my interchangeable language.


She illumines many ways to consider Jesus through examining his scriptural depiction and some ways in which he is similar to African women. She offers the following categorizations for African women’s framing of Jesus as relevant to their lives: Jesus as Sufferer, as Redeemer, and as Victor. After giving a preview of her position of Christ in scripture and African women’s perception of him in such, I will move through each of these Christological classifications in order to establish points of connection and departure from traditional African and Western theological standpoint towards thoughtful theological reflection. I will also have a constructive eye towards how Oduyoye’s Christological readings can imaginatively push current Western and African conceptions of Christology forward. Throughout her work of Christological naming, race and gender act as foci since African women occupying both modes of identity understand Christ from and through these ontological locations. Thus, questions of African-ness and womanhood permeate Oduyoye’s Christological conclusions and propositions as well.

Women, Oduyoye discloses, are critically important to the Christian church’s formulating the details of who Christ is and what work Christ does in the world. She asserts that women know his resurrection best as “Jesus believed in women sufficiently to reveal himself to them.”6 It is after Jesus reveals himself to women that he is believed in, and in some instances, subsequently preached by, women – Martha and Mary as well

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as the woman at Jacob’s well. Jesus’ encounter with women inspires not only belief in him, but also confidence for women to share his message with others. Women are a part of forming the church’s Christological position and articulations.

Oduyoye interprets Jesus’ interactions with women as a movement towards women’s inclusion, visibility, and empowerment as “…one discovers Jesus as a man who related to women as human beings, to be respected and to be trusted.” Women are important to Jesus’ expression in the world. We would do well to pay attention to this, to the fact that Jesus made a conscious effort to interact with women. Women are thus important; their words and testimonies mean something; their talk can be ascribed as God-talk.8

Oduyoye makes clear that women have some stock in theological matters, especially pertaining to the conception of Jesus Christ. For Oduyoye, Christology begins with women, with the words between and exchanged amongst them. In African culture, where oral tradition and storytelling comprise the foundation of how one knows

7 Ibid.
8 In “Women and Ritual in Africa” from Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro’s, The Will to Rise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1992), Oduyoye argues that “Christian feminists undertaking ‘God-talk’ must work for the liberation of women from an image of God created for women by men. When examining the roles of women in religion in Africa – whether speaking of Christianity, Islam, or African traditional religions – we must face two fundamental questions: What responsibilities do women have in the structures of religion? How does religion serve or obstruct women’s development?” (11) Oduyoye warns against a Christian feminist position (African or otherwise) that universalizes women’s Christian experience, especially when handed down from men. In this, she argues representation rightly questioning whether the theological voices of men can hold, and frankly, if they know, the experiences of African women. African women, are thus critical agents in determining the shape and sound of theology from their particular contexts. Men do not have the experiential knowledge of women, knowledge which can offer theological contribution.
themselves, the notion of Jesus as Word (of God) resonates closely and keenly.\(^9\) Jesus Christ embodying Word is presented in a way that African women can understand and relate to. Being embodied Word illumines the multifaceted-ness of his being. To be heard and felt, received and observed allows Christ the flexibility to be many things to many people. Words are critical to understanding the Word of God, and, as Oduyoye points out, within most of the Gospel accounts this knowledge comes to us from a simple scenario: the excited speech of two women.

**Between the Women**

For Oduyoye, Christology is found amidst women going about their ordinary lives. The narration of Jesus’ announcement still rings loudly as theological truth and foundation upon which we gain clarity and understanding about who Jesus is. This account is on the ground, welded deeply within the intricacies of being human, and wrapped up in the little and seemingly small places, such as women’s talk. The connection Oduyoye makes to the simplicity of encounter is crucial to note; she is in line with the Christian narrative as traditional Christian theology highlights the ordinary conditions through which Christ came into the world. The Christian tradition has taught us to adhere to the chronology that scripture attests to – that the Christ event connects first to Jesus in the womb of Mary, a young girl. Oduyoye draws our attention to who

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the actresses are in the ordinary, yet extraordinary moment of Jesus’ proclamation. In line with womanist and feminist theology, through Oduyoye’s urging, we are drawn to seeing the story through whom the humanity of Jesus was formed and informed. The women who have been narratively humbled within the stories of Jesus’ advent are made significant. It is in the “yes” of a young engaged girl that we witness the beginnings of the world’s salvation. The church’s soteriological stances begin in the angel of the Lord telling Mary that she will bear the Messiah. This angelic visit holds some of the beginnings of who the church will know the Christ to be.

Mary and Elizabeth’s meeting and interaction are important. “Together, they rejoiced at God’s salvation, which comes through women,” Oduyoye asserts, “As unborn speaks to unborn, God’s future as discerned by women is made ready by women to be communicated among and by women to the whole community.”10 Women introduce Jesus Christ to each other, first, and then to the world.

In Oduyoye’s observations, I want to be careful to give women the floor and not rush to recognize the male stars of this scenario. This is a theologically critical moment of narrative gender-bending: credit and voice are given to the women who function in this story not as containers of salvation but as contributors of Christological revelation. This is not to take away from the popular moments, but to reframe them. It is true that, in-utero, John rejoices at Jesus’ presence; this is an important conformation, a

conversation of and in the spirit, but if this moment neglects the women also present in the conversation the details of the account and thus revelatory potential and content of this Messianic moment are diminished. The commonplace conversation between these two women might in fact be the “space” housing the declarative moment of the world’s total deliverance. Though John’s leaping can preach, so, too, does Mary’s coming, Elizabeth’s meeting, and Elizabeth’s prophetic tongue. So, too, must the actions of the women make its way into our theological accounts of our Christology’s origin. So, too, must the action of these women comprise an important moment in our canon of Christological knowledge.\textsuperscript{11}

Oduyoye helps us recognize that how we know who Christ is, though read in the words of scripture, first lived in, on, and in-between words spoken by women. Thus to think the beginning of the Christ as confined to one singular annunciation moment that ecclesial history and tradition have acclimated us to misses the chance for us to witness a meta-homiletical moment, where the Christ is introduced, through preached word and through prophetic utterance – and done so through these women.\textsuperscript{12} Oduyoye reminds us that salvation “comes through women.”\textsuperscript{13} These women are preaching through not only

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\textsuperscript{11}Ibid, 58.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 51.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Also, see Matthew 28:1-10. It even haunts the story of Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of Jesus telling his disciples of an empty tomb where Jesus once lay. The notion of beginning and ending are blurred, confused, combined.
their words, but also through their bodies. The paradox is theolog­ically telling – God lives, moves, and has being in complex and commonplace conditions.

It is important to name the weight that pregnancy holds in this story, and the role it plays in shaping the contours of Christology as African women and women all over the world know it. Pregnancy and its access are the proverbial elephant in the room. Oduyoye is very intentional in naming it an obvious and sensitive point; pregnancy is that which surrounds and makes this story. She is keenly aware of the controversy around such a physiological connection to the instantiation of God incarnate. The fear of childlessness is a real factor that looms in the background of this account; it is the fear of many women around the world, including African women.¹⁴ The visitation is an affront to childlessness in a number of ways.¹⁵ But the complicated nature of pregnancy’s role and its connection to African women critically engages the wavering hermeneutic of the importance of women for salvation’s trajectory. This divine-human body saves. The questions of possibility of “holding” the divine can arise: are pregnant bodies the only bodies that play a role in salvation’s manifestation in the earth? I assert that Oduyoye would argue, no. For her, what women hold because of the

¹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2001), 21. Oduyoye interestingly names God as the one who rescued the Hebrew people “…from childlessness and disease, famine and fire, from flood and form the deep sea, from disgrace and humiliation, so we find Jesus in the New Testament snatching women and men away from all domination, even from the jaws of death.” To be clear, this statement does not cite a preference on Oduyoye’s behalf, but signals the redemptive tradition in which Jesus is understood over time. Suffice to say, childlessness is scripturally a concern to be redeemed from.
experiences of their body, because of their lives as females and women, is the decisive aspect in Christological illumination.

Oduyoye’s reflections in “A Coming Home to Myself” in Liberating Eschatology examine her in-depth consideration of the realities of women who are not able to conceive or reproduce. Those who have not biologically mothered undergo psychological stress and duress since reproductive ability is so deeply intertwined in the gender socialization taught to African women. Oduyoye’s focus is not centered on one’s ability to physically reproduce, but on the fellowship of women undergoing and experiencing, challenge and change in and through their bodies. Women’s embodied experience is the x-factor; what women experience corporally is the means through which Christ is known.

What Oduyoye masterfully attends to is the paradigm by which African women’s bodies and thus their beings are forced to align. She states,

Childbearing is central to African women’s self-image, and the scene of the two women swapping pregnancy announcements is a precious one for African women. That the younger woman paid a visit to the older one to share her strange experience signifies for

17 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology (Sheffield, England; Sheffield Press, 2001), 49. The experience of women is the palpable moment from which Christological information can come. Oduyoye notes that the common and well-known fear of childlessness of African women immediately puts them in, connects them with, what is happening in the visitation moment as “Their expected births were due to special divine intervention, just what African women pray for in their dread of the reproach that accompanies childlessness.”
them the solidarity that women crave in times of crisis and in other significant moments of their lives. ¹⁸

The moment of similitude and solidarity, of being woman in this way, is what renders this moment Christologically relevant and impactful. The connecting point between Mary’s and Elizabeth’s stories and women’s stories all over the world is the experience of womanhood. Being a woman can tell the world something new about Christ. The tension with and surrounding women’s bodies is apparent – but there, Jesus is.

For Oduyoye, Christ is found in the community of women’s accounts and their experiences. It is in women reflecting on experiential moments together that Christ can be fully spoken of, into, and over. Oduyoye’s own Christological sensibility is described as a journey that she takes with other women. Thinking alongside the stories and reflections from Bette Ekeya, Anne Nasimiyu, Teresa Hinga, Musimbi Kanyoro and other women’s voices, Oduyoye demonstrates how African women experience Christ in their bodies gifts them with words to name the Word together. Christ is known communally and in body, for this communal Christology reflects “Mary and Elizabeth sharing stories of salvation.”¹⁹ Christology for African women originates not from traditional doctrine, but from personal experience, and further, from communal

experience.20 Who Christ has been and is for African women determines the role of Christ (for them) in the world. Oduyoye and other women theologizing in a balanced dance of particularity and common experience is Christological source. Where women are is the generative space for Christology.

For African women, the question of who Christ is thus closely parallels the inquiry: Who do (the) women say he is?21 The women know something; they are clued in. They are the first preachers of the Word – and they are so amongst themselves. They must be listened to, for they may very well hold the announcement of salvation. This should mean something for the scope and shape of Christology.

Like the voices of Mary and Elizabeth are important because they are women experiencing Christ through and because of their bodies, African women’s words are critical in helping the Christian church understand who Jesus Christ is to, in, and for the world. Clarity is found through their experiences of learning Christ in their social and cultural conditions. Who African women proclaim Christ to be has bearing on how his actions are seen in the world.

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20 Ibid, 16.
21 To add a feminine dimension to the inquiry-reference found in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20, NRSV.
Women teach us an embodied learning of the Christ. In this we receive a comprehensive understanding about perspectives and knowledges and how they should inform the multiplicity of ways Christ can be and is known.22

What the Women Say

African women have not been given adequate room to determine who Jesus Christ is within African theology at large. Thus, Oduyoye inquires and rightly so, “What do women say about Christology? Is there such a thing as women’s Christology? Do the traditional statements of Christology take into account women’s experiences of life?”23 How might African women be included in discerning the movement of God incarnate in the world and in their lives? What role does Christology play into not only the understanding of life for African women, but also into the understanding of human existence, shared life, and cultural and social community as a whole? To answer this from the perspective of an African woman is to allow the Christological moment to live

22 I want to note that Mary and Elizabeth’s interaction can be read as bringing into focus the contours of a feminist moment in her curiosity and inquiry. Mary is not silent, but asks questions. Can we read Mary’s asking the angel of the Lord how her pregnancy could “be”, as feminist inquiry? For Mary to question the angel, for her to question a divine figure much like scriptural male protagonists such as Moses does, serves as a potential moment of agency. Oduyoye does not address this specifically in her work and reflection, but it is interesting to consider the levels of agency within moments are narrated as pre-determined in some ways. Oduyoye does not name the questioning moment as part of the voice, the words, the “conversation” and interaction of the women (though, to be fair, Oduyoye’s intentions and analysis are focused on the embodied conversation between Mary and Elizabeth and not between Mary and the angel). The question of vocality as demonstration of agency, as well as the brief mention of intergenerational womanhood within this story presents instances where agency within this Christological emergence would be intriguing to name and further explore. In a feminist reading of this tangential moment, various levels of women’s voice and agency come to the fore.

into its intensity and complexity. We can also ask the critical question: from whence does Christology come? It comes from the particularities of women, how they understand their bodies culturally and socially, as well as how and where the divine intersects with such earthly living.

Christological epistemology cannot be rationally conjured. It must be learned in community. For Oduyoye, her Christological conclusions come not solely from her own voice, but from the communal conclusions of various African women’s voices including, but also uniquely other than, her own. Her Christological account hems together the experiential narratives of women’s stories and experiences into the Christological and soteriological fabric that covers women and men alike in the Christian church.\textsuperscript{24} Oduyoye brings us to the question that informs out theological standpoints, but that should also jar our religious imaginations: Who is Christ for the African woman? She not only introduces this question as imperative to answer for recognition’s sake, but also for theology’s sake. If women constitute a large number of members in the modern church, who they understand Christ to be should bear great weight in modern interpretations of Christology.

Oduyoye’s emphasis on the Christological generative moment between the words of two women embodying the promise of love, hope, and salvation points us in the direction of a new ecclesiological perspective: one of proper recognition of the role

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 51.
and place of women within theological imaginings and doctrinal precept. She makes this grand gesture quite subtly when she argues, “Christology then is the church’s word about Christ. The question asked by Jesus does not go away. What do I say about The Christ?” In this moment, two things are happening: First she calls forth the church to understand the voice of women to bear great weight. Secondly, she includes women in the moniker “church” and gives them permission to be the “I.” It is imperative for the African church and church at large to utilize this application in Christological (and subsequently theological) considerations. Women’s voices should not have to be fought for to be included. Oduyoye’s Christological starting point is with women, and rightly so.

If Christology is the church’s word about Christ, Oduyoye’s inquiries into whether women are considered within this doctrinal outworking illumines the problem of inclusivity in African and other modes of theological thought. Her questioning and having to re-read Christology for her inclusion, sets up the detrimental reality that Christology is not the church’s word about Christ, but the men in the church’s word about Christ. The church, at least in the definition she is teasing out here, implies women as either outside of or irrelevant to the dealings of the church. Her question, “What do I say about The Christ?” is important, if the emphasis is placed upon the individual “I” in order to represent the fullness and completeness of the collective and communal, “I”.

I read Oduyoye’s inclusion of herself and women within Christian theology as a nod to her culture’s strongest precepts. She is making an African cultural hermeneutical statement in her move to include women. She is putting into practice African beliefs that emphasize the community and the collective over the individualization that Western theological discourse has tried to impose upon African worldview.26 She is rightly allowing the African community to be the African community in totality. In this question “What do I say about The Christ?” she asserts that her voice (and the voices of women within the collective) should matter in how the African church sees Christ and articulates their “I.” African women’s individual voices should be included in communal Christological discernment.

African women’s exclusion in the collective voice about Christ and in theological determinations illustrates for us a refusal to engage in a fundamentally African cultural practice. It instead evidences the power and hold of Euro-centric culture within the African imagination.27 It fortifies colonial power, something many Africans determined to move away from in seeking their independence from European colonial forces. African women’s exclusion in discerning theological matters makes them most attuned to this disparity and contradiction. They inquire about Christ from the position of the least of these within society.

To answer African women’s question, ‘What do I say about The Christ?’ Oduyoye goes “back to what has been said by the Church but especially to the fundamental beliefs that have led to those statements.”28 To do this she looks to offer a thorough account of Christological origins within the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Greek Biblical text. Oduyoye attends to the social, political, and cultural issues of the first five centuries of what she calls “the Christian era” and lastly offers something akin to a postcolonial feminist read of missionary Christology presented to Africans. She traces the places from which her Christological foundations comes in order to advocate for a new angle and lens through which Christology can be done from the African woman’s perspective.29 In outlining the first and evolving forms of Christology biblically and historically, Oduyoye is tracing Christological history. She shows her readers where her voice comes from by outlining what she is responding to and how she, and others like her, are missing from these prior constructions.

Where Oduyoye’s work can be pushed a bit further is in examining how this outline, of privileging certain historical and biblical accounts, parallels the dilemmas faced by many African women who run into issues of historical sources that work to align women with a particular understanding of personhood. For African women,

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29 Ibid, 52.
tradition, too, can serve as a tool of domination.\textsuperscript{30} The political and social climate of the time is also quite determinate of religious impact on particular peoples.

Though historically he hasn’t been readily available to them on their own experiential terms, African women see a point of connection with Jesus with regards to his treatment by society. Like women, he is known in how his body was seen and how it was expected to function in the world. For African women, Jesus is known by the moments of powerless and persecution he faced. The relevance of cultural experience is a critical point in which to do Christology.

\textbf{Jesus Christ Across Time}

Within Hebrew literature, the Christ was always positioned as not only an anointed, but also a powerful, king-like figure.\textsuperscript{31} The king imagery, quite familiar within African contexts, provides Africans not only a means of connection to the stories and events of scripture, but also alignment with the complex narratives of communal existence amidst an ever-changing and shifting social, political and religious environment. For Africans this was reflected in the European colonizing efforts within the continent.

The image of Christ as cosmological ruler undergirds this notion of an anointed one called to instantiate liberation towards life out from under oppressive governmental

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 12. 
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 52.
rule. Within Babylonian occupation, apocalyptic literature affirmed this imagining of a cosmological ruler. Texts such as the book of Daniel, “introduced the figure of the human-being who will descend from the clouds with angels to inaugurate a new era of God’s Reign.”

Thus, as Oduyoye mentions, the image of the anointed one as well as the image of the ethereal human “became the Christian paradigm for the explanation of who Jesus of Nazareth was. Certainly, he was a man from Nazareth, but just as surely he was not like any of the other men of Nazareth.” Both images of the Christ had salvific weight.

As the one already affiliated directly with the mission and impetus of God on earth, the figure of the Christ served as a bridge between human religious action and the action of the divine. Jesus became the link between divine movement in the world and the world taking up divine motion. He provided the means through which the people of God might interact with and encounter God. Oduyoye notes, “There are several others names used for Jesus: Son of God and Lord occur frequently, but the Letter to the Hebrews adds that of High Priest.” He was the intermediary between God and humanity; he was God’s movement, God’s expression in and of the world. This is not a moot point, but one of great significance towards arguing the inclusion of women in how Christ is perceived in light of these nomenclative realities. For Africans, especially

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32 Ibid, 53.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
African women, the names of Jesus Christ signal the multiplicity of his being. It also demonstrates that Jesus is known in particular ways, including ways that are particular to African women.

In exploring the various names of Jesus Christ, Oduyoye is extracting purpose and potential space for her own theological naming. She is making space for Jesus to be (known and) named according to the context and situation, according to the people and what they need Jesus to be for them in ways similar to how he has been historically named. In the move of exploring the nomenclature of Christ, she is bringing the practice into the modern moment for the African woman. She is demonstrating that, across time, what or who Jesus was called concerned how he was needed. With this distinction, Oduyoye is framing African women to be active naming agents in the same way. She is setting the stage for African women to be privy to this same Christological practice and thus to be church in this way as well.

For Oduyoye asking who Christ is for African women has as much credence as traditional doctrinal questions that surround his identity. She asserts, “Having stated the Christ-events we profess our faith in Jesus the Christ as God and Human, God enfleshed (incarnated) as human, so that we might come a little closer to understanding both divinity and humanity.”35 Oduyoye is reading the Christ-event through the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed given the history of who Christ was interpreted to be

35 Ibid.
religiously, politically, and philosophically. This definition holds three parts within it: 
First, Christ as God and human – Jesus is both God and human being; Second, Christ is 
God in the flesh – Jesus came into human-being as God; Third, we gain an 
understanding of both God and the crux of human being in the Christ figure. Christ 
holds multiple identities, is fully human and fully God, and in this, serves as the 
reference point of human ontology. Humanity learns itself and its Creator through the 
being and person of Jesus the Christ. For African women, Jesus’ multiple and hybrid 
identity is important. To be African and to be woman presents a unique set of challenges 
that, upon first glance, might appear solely delimiting, but through African women’s 
Christological interpretation, can speak positively to divine purposing and potential. 
African women are encouraged by the many ways that Christ is known and named as 
they, too, experience the similarity of being diversely named and multiply comprised. 
They intersect human being in critical ways.

Historically, Christology from Western origins has also extended messages that 
tried to couch salvation within harmful colonial rhetoric based on the roles Jesus Christ 
was believed to live into. Oduyoye suggests that in the early Christian church 
Christological theories made a turn to name Christ as savior alone – what Christ did as 
constituting who he was. This Christological standpoint mirrored Pauline epistemology. 
In this train of thought, Jesus was understood primarily through the salvation of 
humanity. Thus the question “saved from what?” rested at the fore of Christological
inquiry, Oduyoye notes, and it should, she argues, open the door for contextual readings of who Christ is.\textsuperscript{36} But colonial encounters in West Africa complicated understanding of how ordinary African people could connect with the idea of this salvific figure (and subsequently ideas of the salvific) in ways particular to them and their culture. This Christological turn signaled what Christ could do; who Christ was was not sufficient in itself. It was narrated to Africans that Jesus was for them and their salvation, but only salvific in certain ways in order to save them from certain things.\textsuperscript{37}

The question “saved from what?” was, thus, sometimes used on the offensive. Oduyoye shows that colonialism tainted African religious imagination by confusing salvation as identified singularly (as taught through the colonizer). She notes that those who held African religious worldview were singled out as in need of this salvific message. Jesus was purposed to save specific people in specific ways – and these persons were African who needed to be saved from themselves.\textsuperscript{38} This included rhetoric where Jesus was named as the only way to God.\textsuperscript{39} But for those who already knew God in their own way, this logic proved perplexing, at best. This soteriological rhetorical shift and how it was used signals the beginnings of a theological anthropological problem:

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 54.
Christ was for people, but peoples designated as in need of a customized salvation. The European was never positioned as needing Jesus; they positioned themselves as the bearers of the salvific message. Thus, Christ as Messiah for Africa was positioned as a distinctly European proposition. Christ’s salvific capability was narrowly rendered through a European register.

African women moved to envision Christ in larger ways, ways that were not pushed onto them by colonialism and ways that did not preclude them from naming his presence and impact. They determined that Christ was for the people who needed him how they needed him. African women needed Jesus to see and watch over them, to know their ailments, and to save them from things they had no ability to resist and fight against on their own. He was not only divine, but he had a tangible impact; for African women, he was able to rescue people from various dangers and threats. Reiterating an empowered answer to “saved from what?” Oduyoye puts it this way,

The answer to the question ‘Who am I’ was being answered, ‘You are Savior’. Since one is always saved from something in order that a new life might emerge, the christological discussions moved to the question ‘Saved from what?’ It is with this contextualized Christology that I cast my lot. It is the struggles of the early Christians that empower each generation; and it is for each place to state who the Christ is for them.40

Christology is realized contextually – not through one cultural imposition or stance; a singular culture determining his being and work in the world is not universal

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40 Ibid.
truth. In other words, who Christ is for African women is who Christ is for African women.

Oduyoye asserts that the early Christians modeled this understanding of Christ and passed this hermeneutical approach down the generations. In her identifying the complexities and construals of salvation, Oduyoye is demonstrating that what tradition passed down was not necessarily a Christology but what I want to name as a Christological hermeneutic, a Christological methodology or (perspectival) means of naming how Christ is understood. It is a thought process, a Christ pedagogy. To be clear, Oduyoye does not assert this claim, but I read it into the distinctions and narratives of Christological particularity that she is fleshing out. Who Christ is depends on who someone is in relation to him. Experience is a primary means of discerning the movement and power of Jesus Christ at work. It can be argued that tradition and history teaches us that the starting point from which to assert a Christology, to understand who Christ is, is one’s self. It can be argued that scripture and history pass down a Christological hermeneutic of contextuality. This is what African women have attached themselves to and have been claiming as a Christological methodological preference.

For Oduyoye, Christ known through salvation becomes a liberative paradigm. Salvation entails liberation from oppression and its forces; it conjures eschatological hope towards new and liberated life in God. Following Jesus opens up room for
imagination of new, liberated life in and under God.41 This liberative framework served as a mode of discipleship as Jesus’ “followers began to see his own life as a liberated and liberating one, and to tell of the annunciation of his birth to show how oppressive cultures are set aside in order to bring in the reign of God.”42 Scripturally, and according to Jewish salvation history, salvation was freedom from material, political, religious, or physical ailment and unjust forces. For African women, Oduyoye claims, “Liberation must be viewed as men and women walking together on the journey home, with the church as the umbrella of faith, hope and love.”43 Jesus has been understood in various ways across time; African women assume themselves within this timeline and within his liberative mission as well.

Christology as Solidarity

African women see potential for religious and communal inclusion in the life and message of Jesus. His embodiment exclaimed a message of communal uplift towards the will of God, not gendered hierarchical practice and sexist prejudice. God enfleshed came to bear a different message, and proved to be a hostile witness against the communal-denigrating spirit of patriarchal practice and ideation.

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
African women appreciate the nuances of Jesus’ activity in the community - who he spoke to, who he blessed, who he saw. This sentiment of who he saw encompasses the heart of African women’s Christology, for who Jesus Christ saw, he could offer hope and promise to. It was the peripheral vision of Christ that African women’s Christology found and still finds profound. Jesus saw those that society, and a patriarchal society at that, refused to see and grant their full vision towards. Jesus lived into that which African women are still advocating their men to ontologically adopt – not to become Christ, but to become like Jesus Christ embodying resistance on behalf of the lesser within their community and society. This mode of Christological embodiment is discipleship for African women and men alike, to embody Christ’s resistance against forces that mistreat their own. The appeal of Christ comes through an ontology of inclusiveness.

Jesus made his way into African women’s hearts, because he is close to African women’s situations and responds to them. He is close to their ontology. He knows the places of lack and yearning within their lives, including a life shaped by cultural standards. Oduyoye notes that the salvific possibility found in Christology “…is what responds to the quest for life and more life that African Religion pursues.” The salvation that Jesus Christ can offer is found in life, and life more abundantly.

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In this way Christ is similar enough to African women for African women to understand their circumstances not as salvific per se (as African women are not and in no way should parallel the Savior), but in expressing solidarity in African women’s suffering. They see that their lives can be means to demonstrate divine possibility - the potential for Christ’s power to be displayed mightily in real time. The lives of African women become the location in which the presence of Christ can be felt, seen, and known. They become the space in which the power of God is experienced. In being seen, heard and known in this way, African women can testify of the divine working within them (in spite of their conditions). The Lord sees and knows them; the Lord does not pass over them.

African women experience Jesus in a myriad of ways. I want to highlight some of the most notable ways that Oduyoye draws our attention to: Jesus as sufferer, redeemer, and victor. These experiences are not distinct but fluid moving in and out of each other. And within them, the overarching themes of race and gender that African women are forced to grapple with in their cultural locations and theological standpoints are further attended to. Oduyoye examines how a liberative Christology for African women can come through such categorizations by encouraging African women’s recognition of

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46 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church into Account,” *The Ecumenical Review*, 10/1995, Volume 47, Issue 4, pp. 479–489, especially 480. It is important to note that African theology often emphasizes race and class issues, but hardly gender and/or sexuality.
similarity in Christ and difference with Christ. She alerts the church to see itself in light of the Christ who sees into the human condition.

I will now turn to analyzing these positions more in depth to gain clarity about their theological use for African women’s construction of an emancipatory Christology. Emphasizing connective points but also dissenting facets illustrate how and where African women can claim Jesus to be like them or for Jesus to champion their causes.

**Sufferer: Bodies in Christ**

The ministerial life of Christ was so impacted by suffering that the pressures and weight of it bore into his salvific mission. Though it is impossible to name where suffering played into the enfleshment of God, Oduyoye seems to suggest that Jesus was impacted and perhaps further brought into the narrative of suffering in his constant and continuous encounters with it, almost as if his being amidst it allowed for it to become more a part of his purpose. “That story,” what Oduyoye names as Jesus’ life amongst the poor and oppressed, “saw suffering, sacrifice and the Cross, as salvific.”47 She continues, “The Christ is the one who suffers so that humanity might have the fullness of life intended for them by God.”48 In order for Jesus to be the bearer of the good news of life in God, it seems that suffering, in a sense, integrates itself more and more into his

48 Ibid.
narrative. The suffering of others made Jesus’ role in the reversal of suffering, and in the redemption of life without suffering, salvific.

Suffering is vital to understanding what Jesus’ impact on what constructions of “life” mean for humanity. Could one live life without suffering? Might part of salvation’s revelation be not only in the elimination of suffering, but also in its ebbs and flows? Could the power of salvation be found in humanity’s knowing suffering so well that its elimination alerts humanity to a different mode of life?

Perhaps suffering holds meaning within the Christological narrative insofar that it makes the impact of salvation all the more poignant and felt. Perhaps salvation can be known best when suffering is also known. Suffering is the universal introduction that salvation concludes. Jesus’ saving work is a response to the ills that many experience. Oduyoye points us to the narrative of suffering often found amongst a group that she is most familiar with and has had experience with herself. I see her work inquiring: What does Jesus’ relationship to suffering mean for African women and what does it reveal about their suffering?

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49 Suffering is not a requirement to salvation, but often a feature present in the salvation’s narrative. I am in no way advocating for the requirement or necessity of suffering in order for salvation to be, but am insisting on a close reading of what salvation means to the being who has experienced suffering. In this, I want to argue that salvation can be identified immediately, it can be recognized well by one who has undergone or experienced suffering. Suffering, in a way, serves as a lens to sharpen recognition of what can be categorized as good, as healing, and salvific.
Jesus’ experiences with the poor and oppressed, Oduyoye seems to suggest, contributes to his mission to save. His relationship to suffering informs his salvific work on the earth. Can suffering beget a level and depth of relatiornality that only Jesus Christ can reveal? Is this discipleship? Is it African women’s discipleship to gain a level of spiritual consciousness because of their suffering? Oduyoye seems to think not, as only Jesus can relate to suffering on both sides of existence, on the creation and Creator side. Only Jesus can know suffering at depths and levels that human beings are unable to reach. To reiterate, Christ is the one who “suffers so that humanity might have the fullness of life intended for them by God.”

He does not suffer as an invitation to humanity to suffer what he suffered, but for humanity to see suffering and engage suffering how he did. He is not immune to suffering, but uniquely calls his followers forth to meet suffering, to recognize its complicated manifestation, and to respond to it.

This is a link for African women: Jesus is the one who knows first-hand what the worst of human experience feels like. Like them, Jesus is in close proximity with the ills and downside of human existence. He is fully aware of the stresses of embodied life. For African women this comes as a great comfort; Jesus knows – in his mind, in his body – not only what suffering is, but most importantly, what suffering feels like.

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Jesus’ embodiment is considered most important and that which directly connects him to the experience of African women. But the particularity of Jesus’ embodiment and that of the woman of African descent does not appear as such an easy connection to make and could pose a problem. To over-particularize Jesus’ living into his body and African women’s embodied-life, brings up questions concerning the universality of Jesus’ impact for the entire Christian church. Is Jesus only for those who suffer? The danger of such a proclamation is that to “give” Jesus to the least of the least, to African women and others, is to throw into question who else Christ can belong to (in addition to what characterizes the life of these persons. Is suffering the main feature of life as an African woman?). At least this is a potential perception. Jesus belonging \textit{primarily} to the least of these could translate to the notion that in his embodiedness he only peripherally belongs to others who hold more power or influence in their societies, such as men, for example.

What is reflected here in this potential dilemma, the dilemma where Jesus belongs \textit{primarily} to marginalized persons? Who owns Jesus? Who gets Jesus? These questions are fraught with ideas of ownership and perhaps belonging, but also around the nature of the God-man’s \textit{being had}. Can Jesus belong to someone? African women see this question at the heart of Christian colonial and missional endeavors that purported a
polluted logic of gendered ownership and theological truth claims. Leaning too far on either side of the spectrum is cautioned against: to transition from Jesus only being savior to Africans in particular ways to Jesus as connected to the marginalized within society alone delineates the reach and sway of Jesus’ mission. I would warn that this logic jeopardizes the notion that he is for all people. However, a shift in language to Jesus’ life as a claim on all of humanity is a productive corrective, here.

The difference between having sole claim on Jesus and Jesus serving as ontological companion who lays claim to humanity, I assert, can be found in the perspective of the theologian. African women’s theology purports that Jesus is had through Jesus having them. The claim does not come from humanity onto Jesus, but is felt in one’s being claimed by Jesus. African women consider their lives in light of the life of Jesus and the precepts he offers for his followers. African women “have” Jesus only insomuch if they are had by Christ. But this having functions not in a propertied or domineering sense, but in a mode of discipleship, of meaning-making affiliated with the meaning Christ has made for them.

In Christ, human being, which does not preclude human embodiment, is claimed for and towards God. Christ moves bodies and embodiment towards wholeness in the Creator. Christology is thus captive and captivating in this way – human life is taken into the Christ and made to be his. Thus, when African women have to state the obvious

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in claiming the body of Christ and their bodies connected, a problem emerges, not in Christology, but concerning a racialized and gendered hermeneutic of Christ and of African women’s bodies and embodiment. To distance these women’s bodies and beings away from the embodiment of the Christ is to assert a logic not only of ownership over the reach of Christ’s presence (what Christ can be and do embodied), but also of ownership over the purpose and function of African women’s bodies.

The need for the argument that women are connected to Christ exposes an injurious thought tradition where the power of Christ is delimited and the importance of African women is known only in light of others naming their value. In this intellection, Christ is controlled and African women are owned. This logic does not allow for the fullness of who African women are to come into contact with the fullness of who the Christ is. It instead buys into a colonialist theological and Christological outlook where Christ is colonized (and done so right alongside Africans). To operate in a theo-logic where one who is not an African woman can determine the conditions of African women’s meaning to or for theology signals the centrality and dominance of a Western understanding of theology’s location, and furthermore, its center.53 In this, the West positions itself as that which determines African women’s place within (its own) theological outlook and thus within Christian theology as a whole. Oduyoye insists that

53 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church into Account,” The Ecumenical Review, 10/1995, Volume 47, Issue 4, pp. 479–489, especially 479-480. This European centered thinking has harmfully tried to assert a Western vision of womanhood onto African women.
“The power to define -- to enable a group to name itself the representation of true humanity -- is truly an awesome power...This is how structures of injustice develop.”

But the problem does not lay with the West alone; African women have struggled for recognition amongst the men in their societies, too. Gender issues and sexism in African churches is not a Western phenomenon, but an age-old issue for many African women dealing with African men interested in shoring up positions of power. African women writing and thinking themselves in to theological consideration touches on their intersectional identity of being both black African and female. This is a topic to be furthered explored as a matter of theological anthropology, but for the moment, we can hold the following as true: African women’s theology aids in providing an alternative viewpoint that determines Christology and black women’s ontology can exist in concert towards theological forward-thinking and contemporary theological relevance.

Can Jesus be had? Can Jesus be owned?

For African women, this is not the question, but the problem – the problem that has a hand in producing their experiences of suffering.

54 Ibid, 484.
56 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Introducing African Women’s Theology (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2001), 31. Oduyoye asserts that for African women, theology is “a statement of faith enabling them to live their tomorrow today, as they await new life, the resurrection of the life of God in the midst of all creation beginning with ... humans made in God’s image.”
Jesus’ embodiment is not a means to power, ownership, or theological superiority, but exudes that Christ knows human suffering. Jesus knows intimately, with his body and being, the experiences of those at the bottom. He knows what embodiment of the most painful sort feels like. His connection to black women’s embodiedness is not a theft of Jesus’ body for black women’s theological agendas; it is claiming space for black women alongside everyone else that Jesus knows how their bodies feel, what they have experienced, and what they have encountered.

The Christological suggestion is massive - Jesus knows our bodies as well as we know our bodies. God enfleshed knows the details of all of our flesh, in and out. In this, African women are not as distant in embodied experience from Christ as colonial and slave history have tried to make them out to be. For African women, Jesus knows their embodied experiences, the details of their hardships and obstacles. He is co-sufferer. The one who took the sins of the world on his shoulders to the cross, knows the weight of sin, sins that ensconces suffering. He names the true nature of suffering for what it is and where it is – it is not the plan of God.\textsuperscript{57} Knowing Jesus lives this closely to African women’s embodiedness and to their experience lends space to consider Jesus as sibling in suffering holding solidarity, not only because he experienced suffering in his own body, but because he knows the inner workings of suffering’s impact on all bodies.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 57.
African women understand fully the theological limitations of embodiment – thus they join themselves to the one who experienced embodiment in difficult ways as well, who defied normative respectable embodiment in order to preach the end of suffering and death in and through his own body.

**Redeemer: Colonialism and Patriarchy**

For many Africans the notion of redemption can clearly be seen in relation to colonial encounters; many Africans sought to be free from the rigidness of the colonizer’s Christianity. This idea of freedom from colonial regulation and monitoring of religion and culture is part of the African Christian narrative. Oduyoye draws connections between Africa and Israel’s colonial rule. She briefly characterizes how God redeems and delivers in the Hebrew scriptures in the following ways: 1) nation from nation; 2) from national sin; 3) individuals from other people; 4) from dehumanization/poverty (that begets slavery); 5) from personal actions that disturb others’ relationship with others and with God; and in 6) God orchestrating repentance or a return to right religion.\(^{58}\) Redemption is characterized by right relationship with another.

In order to be redeemed, one has to know from what they are being redeemed, restored, and rescued. In *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Lesslie Newbigin expresses Oduyoye’s sentiments well: Africans gave the white man’s

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religion a try, but the false narrative of white dominance and superiority was built upon it. He (the white man) gained religious, political, and social acumen in his religion being “heard” but not necessarily “accepted.” The difference between religious exploration and residence came to be the sticking point of missional Christianity.

The very existence of missions built the case for a need for redemption. For Africans, redemption holds similar definition and weight as it did for the Jewish people. The notion of oppression and evangelical hierarchy leading to moments such as the slave trade, provided perspective for Africans about the purpose and power of Jesus over and against their opposition. For African women, the opposition is multifaceted; even if oppression manifests in various forms it comes from the same origin – patriarchal thinking tethered to flawed understandings of whiteness. Oduyoye leans towards connecting whiteness with patriarchy, but does not voice the connection as explicitly. Instead, she asserts the broader argument that Western influence as a whole works adversely against African communities. African women saw that the combination of the familiar (patriarchal forces) and the foreign (colonial forces) proved itself the craftiest adversary to overthrow. The problems found in colonialism highlighted new and entrenched problems with masculinity and whiteness.

In the colonial evangelistic moment, arguably what was evangelized along with the Christian message was a message of masculinity as the determinative standard. What carried the message of Christianity were its messengers. In Ghana many British missionaries, who were male and who were “not fitted for English ordination,” were wrestling with their own status as men from their respective societies. According to Oduyoye, missional archives convey that “people of dubious intelligence and integrity were launched upon the unsuspecting savages of Africa south of the Sahara.” While the conditions of the social and thus political and cultural formation would prove interesting to examine, suffice it to say, the most important aspect of the formation of some of these missionaries quarries in this direction: towards what were these men striving and how did it manifest in their movement in the world and their interaction with others, especially African peoples? Francophone cultural theorist Aimé Césaire suggests this to be the detrimental effect of colonialism, that not only are the colonized violated, but the colonizers are also harmed in ascribing to notions of superiority that can only be striven for but never obtained. In this line of logic, Césaire illustrates how colonization wreaks havoc. Coupled with the underlying activity of masculinity’s exemplification through imperialism and conquest, colonialism and competitions of masculinity set the stage for oppressive conditions that both African men and women

62 Ibid.
would not only be subjected to, but evangelized under and through. Masculinist and patriarchal narratives colored colonial missional ambitions. The Scramble for Africa had economic and social roots.

Thus, the question of patriarchy, its development, and its influence can come to the fore as well: where did patriarchy, as Africans now know it, come from? Whose patriarchy is African women’s theology attentive to and resistant against? Is patriarchy an import? Was it a European ontological enterprise that provided the foundation on which colonization and evangelism would anchor itself, or was it something that rooted itself into something, some notion of communal being and operation already present? Oduyoye holds to the latter, that patriarchy existed in African culture and society but “colonial rule reinforced these patriarchal systems and compounded the words of African women by augmenting their ordinary burdens with those of their Western sisters.”

Patriarchy in itself is familiar to African women. The notion of the patriarch is commonplace in many cultural contexts; it is deeply rooted in African culture. In Daughters of Anowa, Oduyoye utilizes the medium of African creation storytelling to assert this point; patriarchal thought is woven into many aspects of African life and thus forms and shapes African culture. It is the foundation of proverbs and creation narratives – patriarchy is found in the culture’s wisdom references and how peoples

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come to understand their origins and beginnings. For Oduoye, patriarchal thought and worldview had been present in African myth-making and storytelling since before the initial moments of colonial contact. It surrounds African notions of origins and origination. Oduoye reminds us that in Africa, colonisation did not create patriarchy; it only strengthened it.

65 See Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), especially chapter four “Colonizing Bodies and Minds: Gender and Colonialism.”

Distinct from Oduoye’s position, Nigerian sociologist of religion Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues for a reconsideration of from whence patriarchy came to West African culture and context. She argues that it did not exist in West African culture prior to colonial contact. Instead she argues that it is precisely through the injurious results of colonialism that patriarchal culture was activated as harmful practice within African contexts.

Focusing on the medium of West African language (particularly the language of the Yoruba) as a focal point to interpret the cultural conditions and pre-conditions of West African identity formation and communal life, Oyèwùmí identifies the unisex language often employed or the de-gendered linguistic parameters of West African dialect to pinpoint that the gendering of language that was employed to speak of people, both women and men, and did not signal hierarchy but similitude.

At first glance, Oyèwùmí and Oduoye may seem opposite in their ideologies. But they hold similarity in paying attention to West African oral tradition as indicative of cultural patterns of influence. Oyèwùmí, at the very least, helps us think through the chronology of telling, of story. She brings into sharp focus our assumptive rationale and calls them into question: When did stories originate? Can we trace when origin stories actually appeared within traditions which held sacred the tradition of oral storytelling? What are we to make of this conflict of interest? She forces us to consider when the documentation of oral tradition began in various cultures and what such recording means for the history of belief. If history through storytelling is a dynamic force and entity, what aspects of it might have shifted, evolved, changed in its lifespan? Given the uncertainty of accurately knowing when African myths, creation stories, and proverbs emerged as opposed to when they first began to be documented, might the origin story of patriarchy’s true emergence in West African cultures be accurately known?

While Oyèwùmí’s inquiries catalyze doubt or at least the quarrying of historical beginnings, what we must keep in mind is the complexity of patriarchy amidst other forms of cultural performance. Oduoye does not align her theological inquiry with the assertions that Oyèwùmí makes sociologically. Oduoye is clear to state that though she was born into a matrilineal culture, her culture was still undergirded and foundationally patriarchal.

This begs questions concerning the differences between matrilineal kinship relations and kinship structures within patriarchal culture. Amongst Oduoye’s people, the Akan, matrilineality designates the importance of kinship ties and the relevance of everyone within the family, especially the relevance of a tribe’s or group’s own women; but its confluence with patriarchy’s formative influence still proves problematic and troubling for African women. A culture can be both matrilineal and patriarchal with the patriarchal aspects functioning as the most powerful meaning-making factors.
The combination of that which African men sought to obtain (the benefits of European manhood), and that which they already had to secure their position as powerful figures amongst their own (African manhood) created a logic and culture that moved against the traditional African values of community. The notion of individualism crept into African worldview corrupting its vision of communal well-being towards a narrative of individual gain and security. Individualism, a new way of primarily being for one’s self instead of for the other or for the collective, was not native to West African worldview but found footing in Western-originated Christian discourse.\textsuperscript{67} The ontological language West Africans spoke was one of communal sharing and recognition. The notion of abandoning this for individual gain was a result of colonial

So given this entanglement, what is it that Oduyoye and African women believe Jesus to redeem? Returning to Oyewumi proves most helpful here. Reading her alongside Oduyoye helps create the clearest picture around the nuances of what African patriarchy manifested itself as and looked like. I want to read them together here. Even if Oyewumi and Oduyoye do not fully align on the locus from which patriarchy emerged in African contexts, they can agree that patriarchy in concert with the performance of notions of whiteness hinder African women the most from leading equanimous lives in their respective cultures and contexts.

The power of white patriarchy proved a force too wild to contain. It is difficult to know if patriarchy in itself was death-dealing to African women. Oduyoye does not say. She merely names patriarchy the culprit in relation to a number of problems that African women have to deal with theologically. Oyewumi can fill in some of the gaps, here. The patriarchy that Oduyoye finds feeding the pain and subordination of African women is not an African patriarchy per se, but a European one. Oyewumi’s analysis helps us understand that it is patriarchy in it white expression that creates the most dire circumstances under which African women are marginalized. If African women had been living under patriarchal before colonial contact beforehand, perhaps the brand of patriarchy proves most problematic for them today. If patriarchy has worsened to an unbearable form of control for African women, it can be argued that its increased detriment is a result of colonialism strengthening its worst features.


pedagogy. Patriarchal influence as a Eurocentric theological enterprise was expressed most forcefully by missionary methodology and reinforced in African culture. Theological positions reflected this imbalanced reality.

A Christology of this caliber did not have room within its framework for African understandings of Christ in general, let alone African women’s perspectives. Thus, contrary to what was largely dissipated, Jesus could be known in ways outside of Western designations. What Jesus came to do, to draw people to God, did not run counter to African realities. Oduyoye notes:

... the Western missionary enterprise in African inaugurated a Christology that took no account of Africa’s realities beyond the existence of numerous divinities and ancestral spirits. The emphasis, therefore, was Jesus as the only way to God.69

Who an African is cannot preclude religious foundations – this is what the colonizers did not understand. This is what Oduyoye is putting in front of us - Christology, in its original form and in the truest sense, was not, and could not be, available in right form in the colonial moment for it relegated Africans to wrongful ontological status according to their religious beliefs. Colonialism taught that Africans had no history or rightful religious foundation. Some were even sold into slavery. Thus, the message of Christ that many Africans received was not accurate. African people were not only told who Christ was to be for them, but who they were to be in order for

68 Ibid, 33-34.
69 Ibid, 54.
Jesus to be Christ to them. Christ was predetermined for them in following a Euro-centric ontological model – but ontology cannot be imitated. Though many Africans “accepted them [the Western standards of living] as necessary to the religion,”\(^\text{70}\) because of their pre-existing religious foundations and beliefs, Africans already had experience with the salvific proclamations Christianity thought it was introducing.

For African women the central issue does not concern whether patriarchal theological thinking doomed Africans and African women to an inauthentic theological and Christological position, but rather how to parse the conditions that introduced Christ from who Christ is considered to be for Africans, especially African women. The distinction between the evangelist and their gospel message must be parsed out in order to gauge Christological authenticity. African women are interested in theological truths that reflect their experiences and include their voices.\(^\text{71}\) African women’s religious expression, including their Christology, I add, must fit into the understandings of their culture; anything outside of this is an affront to their ontological foundations.\(^\text{72}\)

Thus another and perhaps a larger question emerges: what havoc has the culture of colonialism wreaked on relationality between the sexes? Oduyoye reminds us, women were always a large part of the origins of Christology. Both Mary and Elizabeth


\(^{72}\) Ibid, 26.
rejoiced about God’s plan to save the world through the child that Mary would bear and raise.\textsuperscript{73} God’s salvation is not only literally borne by women, but announced as such. Mary, mother of God, was the first one to preach the Christ to a pregnant woman and an unborn child.\textsuperscript{74} Women named Jesus’ purpose. These women provide the first context in which Jesus was nurtured, educated, and made aware of the world in which he lived. The Lord, in part, learned the condition of being human from women. If women played such a central role in the world knowing who Jesus was, and in Jesus knowing who he was, why are women’s lives and place within society devalued? Why do women struggle as much as they do for recognition in and through the Christian church?

The divide between men and women speak not necessarily to theological premise, but social and cultural conditioning. Inequality is learned behavior; it is an instantiation of injustice, the very injustice that Jesus came to upend.

As we will see in the next chapter Oduyoye shows where and how theological anthropology is directly linked to theological understanding of women and men as creatures of God. This is the understanding of human communal existence that comes to bear on the church’s account that Christ came to mend the fissures thwarting human community and to uproot the divisions that have caused and fed the turmoil of gender discrimination.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 51.
\textsuperscript{74} This can be argued as the first gathering of what would later formally become the Christian church.
It is clear that the divide that exists within humanity’s misunderstanding of the self and the other continues to feed the gender gentrification within the church. This divide is symptomatic of a flawed anthropology, a misunderstanding of what being created by God means to those who live into this reality. It is the result of a failed and harmful pedagogy of relationality.

**Victor: Subversive Resistance**

The Bible is a collection of contextual encounters with the divine, with the self, and with others. It is particular to certain moments in time. Similarly today, it is read through the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of those utilizing it.  

Particular themes and ideas held great importance within the highlighted cultural beliefs and practices of ancient Israel. One such theme concerned the imagery around kingship and power. The hope for a powerful king made sense given the conditions of Israelites; the king would be the one to restore honor and order upon a pained community overrun by dominant forces. Analogously, African cultures ascribe to certain societal hierarchies where ruling persons, such as kings, would be given certain ruling responsibilities and thus receive great respect from the community. This point of relation appears beneficial to Africans’ case of claiming similitude and thus

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76 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2001), 21. Oduyoye notes that Israel, though a conquered nation, had few limits on their worship practices and their adherence to the Law as long as they did not conflict with Roman rule. Their oppression was not complete, but still adverse in a number of ways.
closeness to the cultures of the scriptures and thus claims to Christianity in ways that acknowledge the validity of their respective cultures. Oduyoye believes this king imagery is both culturally important and yet harmful to African women. To quote her at length,

In Hebrew religion and culture, prophets, priests and kings were anointed, as were the sick, the dying and the dead. In their struggle to survive as culturally and materially insignificant and militarily impotent nation among the powerful ones of the Fertile Crescent, the Hebrews hankered after the return of the one illustrious king they produced, David. Buffered around by more powerful nations, the People of Israel were sustained by the faith that, in due course, Yahweh will send them a Ruler like David, an anointed one, a Messiah. The hope was very much alive right into the period of the Roman colonization of Palestine.77

The emphasis on the power of the Lord to defeat Israel’s enemies is a key characterization and marking of the Messianic-figure anticipated. Christ can serve as a means to resist colonial forces. The people needed a Savior of this kind, of this caliber. They were being disadvantaged by the colonial forces of their time, the Roman Empire. Many Africans see a point of connection, for they too, needed and still seek a Savior of this sort: a Savior who would resist and even destroy harmful colonial influences.78

Salvation included “the overcoming of external physical enemies”79 as well as resistance against life-denying forces.80

An interesting idea that I assert might be embedded within Oduyoye’s exploration of a Christ resistant to powerful external forces is that this imaging of Christ is framed within the bounds (and towards the benefit) of a predominantly male-oriented society. Men led the colonizing efforts in West Africa. In her tracing this history, Oduyoye can be utilized to read a point of connection between ancient Hebrew Messianic understandings and modern African women’s conceptualization of the Christ-figure. The two are not mutually exclusive, but issue the same hope. The Christ is expected and trusted to be powerful - powerful enough to defeat the enemies of God’s people, especially on behalf of the least of these within such societies.

What is illumined here are two pathways with which to see Christ as victor if African women are equally assumed part of the African community, namely Christ as victor as pitched during colonial evangelism and Christ as victor over gender inequality. The latter imagery acts as a resolution to the first as, in addressing both race and gender, African women find and experience Christ’s liberation action where multiple sites of identity are considered. The colonial angle illumes Africa’s problems with imperial forces. Violence is meted out upon this Christ figure because of an imperial enterprise

that de-values African life, land, and culture. It puts forth a Christ intent on eliminating African religious culture in favor of a Eurocentric one. The gendered angle examines the victor imagery as primarily a male-dominated one, but seeks resolution for and reconciliation with the “Christ as victor” image. It questions the potential salvaging power of a male Christ-figure outside of colonial structures and the patriarchal consequences inherent within them. It asks, “Can Christ save those from a system in which men gain prominence and power? How might this manifest?” Questions remain if salvation can in fact include right recognition of all human beings.

**Racism**

Colonially, this Christ as victor image created a clash between African culture and religious conceptions of salvation that European colonizing missionaries brought with them. For the missionaries, the victory of Christ would look like the erasure of African religious culture and the implementation of a European-style Christian lifestyle. Kenyan religious scholar Teresa Hinga calls this Christological imagery, “Christ the conqueror.”

Oduyoye illumines how the Christ-figure pitched by European missionaries created a divide between conceptions of the divine that Africans had held for centuries and this new dichotomic religious approach called Christianity that claimed any and all

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other gods evil. This religiously-spawned racism seeped into the social imagination of many African Christians. African Instituted Churches were some of the first institutions to take up this mentality against its own. They took up the language and fears of their European predecessors. Faith in a victorious Christ, for many, would come to mean a transmitted faith and fear against African traditional religion and its belief systems. Oduyoye labels this movement a form of alienation. She writes, “Since the 1980s a new form of Christianity that dispenses salvation through the total alienation of Africans from African culture and the instrumentalization of the gospel for material prosperity is taking over the Christian scene.”

According to Oduyoye’s observations the historical narrative remains that opposition of African Traditional Religion within African Churches point to the slow integrative work of European religious ideas and ideals as still imprinting and impacting African religious life. The consequences of colonial impact are far-reaching. Many Africans were taught self-hate through this religious medium.

Oduyoye utilizes language of alienation to further describe the damage of colonization. For many Africans there was no adaptation of European religious views, but a complete adoption and assimilation that tried to erase African religious foundation completely from its importance in African social affairs and society. This “victorious

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83 Oduyoye published *Introducing African Women’s Theology* in 2001, thus her claims that a new form of Christianity emerged in the 1980s dates this conversation as happening across three decades.
Christ” for Europeans, then, was purported as a Christ who moved against the African polytheistic culture of these “superstitious barbarians.” Europeans who did not understand the religious foundation of various African communities would be the ones to deem African religious history and its actors not only irrelevant, but evil. What this (European) Christ was actually victorious over was African culture; He was sent to destroy it or rather the colonists brought him to Africa to save it. This conception of a “victorious Christ” signaled a Christ that could defeat the darkness and dark forces of African Traditional Religion, and thus those connected to it. Christ was then positioned and pitted against African culture at its foundation. This Messiah was successfully used, in some cases, to alienate Africans from themselves.

I want to assert this a pedagogical tool and a learned hermeneutic. It is a hermeneutic of a Christ of another culture, a culture mal-adjusted to and ignorant of how the religious flows within African common life. This “victorious Christ” railing against Africans was not the African’s Christ, but the European’s – a Christ they were wrongly taught had their best interests in mind. The problem rested in the assumption and assertion of European culture’s Christological foundation as the sole interpretation. Oduyoye draws our attention to how Christological hermeneutic should vary based on the people and their traditions and customs.

God did not take issue with African religious culture, Europeans did. Oduyoye illumines that Africa was held captive to the Euro-centric notions of divinity. But God is a liberative God, a force of justice and redemption. Jesus Christ lives into this truth as well. For Africans, especially African women, the weight of oppression and marginalization is known too well. Christ who delivers through his very enfleshment speaks to the power of this God to return God’s creation back to its life-giving form. For Oduyoye “[...] the redemption Africa experiences by turning to God through Christ is not only from ‘wrong religion’ and ‘wrong government’ it is also from the perversions of human nature that make it possible for some to prey on others and for individuals to trample upon the humanity of others.”86 At its root the problems with some depictions of Christ as victorious come down to recognition of one’s humanity and right to exist in the world without the threat of being crushed. For African women, this was exponentially increased given gender disparity. They firmly believe that in addressing the full problems of African women as it relates to the “Christ as victor” image a solution for the entire African community can be found.

Sexism

“Christ as victor” language also speaks to intra-communal power dynamics that must not escape theological interrogation. I see Oduyoye’s account of “Christ as victor” in powerful and governing ways pointing us to realize the process of liberation in two

86 Ibid, 23.
directions: the first is liberation through patriarchal understandings of dominance often trafficked through colonialism; the second, exponentially more intricate and subsequently more difficult than the first proposition, is liberation through undercutting patriarchy’s prominence. Both advocate for liberation through similar means but towards alternate ends. The first falls short if it does not consider the latter even if both might be working in Jesus’ mission to recognize the full humanity of everyone he encounters.

This outlook of Jesus’ victory over colonial forces, I assert, also presents a gender issue for African women. Whether Christ liberates Africans out from under colonial rule is not the largest issue at play: what is are the conditions in which women and men will continue to live even if liberated. African colonial resistance unfortunately still begets African women and men making due with life in predominantly patriarchal societies at worst and, at best, societies wrestling with and working to re-write patriarchal social order. Even if Africans aligned their Christian culture with postcolonial liberative objectives, Christological hope still appears most beneficial to African men.

For African women, getting out from under colonial rule still issues hardship through patriarchal conditions (many secured and strengthened by colonial culture). Thus, I wonder: can and should African women’s Christological hopes still potentially align with that of a patriarchal society? Can African women’s Christology, and I wonder, can Oduyoye’s Christology, still depart from the same thought and anticipation
rooted in patriarchal culture? Where should African women’s Christology land? Should African women be “descendants” of the “face” of a Christ who redeems one from their enemies through patriarchal articulations of power? In other words what is Christ’s victory outside of violent depictions and demonstrations of power that mirror patriarchal norms? The problem seems vast. African women’s liberation relies on equitable cultural and social shifts, but these shifts must do the collective and difficult work of changing the core of many African societies.

Oduyoye and other women hope to forge new and liberating paths in liberating Christ even from this imagery towards more accurate depictions and descriptions. Factors such as the gender of Jesus are directly challenged in offering liberation freely to women and men. This move demonstrates colonial subversion and sexual resistance. Jesus’ liberation from gendered restrictions also counters colonial perceptions of control; it is a total liberating effort. If African women’s voices were heard within the church, this reality would be clearer – liberation for all is liberation at its core.

Oduyoye points out that it is made evidently certain “…in Africa that Jesus* [sic] is at work freeing people from the unedifying history of sexism.” 87 Jesus’ seeing all of humanity as important is a sign of his victory in the world. In Jesus liberating all peoples, women included, He works to shatter oppression, subverting and dismantling systems in total ways.

Paying attention to the stories of Jesus where women are present illustrate this liberating power. Women must be included in Jesus’ victorious work in the world. Oduyoye recognizes that “The subject of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is receiving more and more attention in the church as women ask for recognition.” In the Christian church, Jesus’ interaction with women must gain more traction as relevant to his salvific mission and its details. The problem rests in the troubling question that foregrounds this reality: “from whom are women asking for recognition?” How the Christian church sees the work of Christ can answer this question for us. At a fundamental level, the church’s hermeneutical lenses are being challenged. To best understand the unique life, ministry, and work of Christ, there must be a hermeneutical turn toward seeing Jesus gain victory in surprising, new, and nuanced ways. Though Jesus is understood in a tradition that privileges masculine conceptions of victory, Jesus subverts them; Oduyoye sees this subversion in Jesus’ feminine attributes.

In Jesus, African women find a man who took “a revolutionary stance in the patriarchal context in which he had to operate.” In other words, though Christ was anticipated through particular means, most associated with masculinity and male conceptions of victory and liberation, the ministry of Christ took a different form than desired or assumed. For Oduyoye, his victory - his liberative action in the world for all -

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is best seen through a feminine perspective. Jesus’ feminine qualities provide sites of connection and liberation for African women (and ultimately African men). Oduyoye asserts that the “Christ of the women of Africa upholds not only motherhood, but all who, like Jesus of Nazareth, performing ‘mothering’ roles of bringing out the best in all around them.”

Ugandan nun and scholar, Anne Nasimiya goes so far to describe Jesus as “the mother” making plain African women’s claim to and connection with him as giver of life.

Jesus’ involvement with women, and message towards women’s inclusion and liberation from patriarchal social foundations, is his victorious work that the church must align itself with. Christ as victor is only so insomuch as he defeats harmful patriarchal standards that oppress African society at large, that not only harms women, but which also limits men as well. The truth of Christ as victor, then, concerns the treatment of women.

For Oduyoye Jesus tramples gender boundaries and binaries towards a vision of humanity turned towards God. Refuting gender limitations is included in how Jesus

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exercises victory since the church “... encounter[s] the silence and invisibility of women in men’s stories.”

Oduyoye argues Jesus’ subversiveness in his deliberate advocacy for and communal involvement with women. “He rendered them service, teaching them, healing them, waking up their dead, saving them from exploitation and victimization,” she argues. Interestingly enough, her characterizations of Jesus blur the lines of femininity and divinity, and perhaps intentionally so. Jesus as a salvific figure can be envisioned as feminine. Service, the thing women are most relegated to, joins a list that describes Jesus’ saving work. Do men serve and teach and occupy what can controversially be named “feminine roles”? Yes, and though the list is unique to Jesus suggesting divine identity, the church would be remiss to ignore some of Jesus’ strongest qualities being those which are often culturally associated with and assigned to women.

To be clear, neither women (nor men) can heal the sick, wake the dead, and save people from the sins of exploitation and victimization; limited and finite human beings are not capable of these feats. Only Jesus can do these things, but as Oduyoye helps us notice, he is a Savior who, in moments of salvific demonstration and freedom, echoes the

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93 Ibid.
practices of women. Thus, women are represented here. They show up in God’s saving work in the world.

Jesus’ subversiveness is secured in his alignment with women’s attributes. Jesus not only advocates for women, but he is understood as feminine in some key ways. He is known as a “…compassionate and caring one who anticipated people’s needs. Jesus was a mother par excellence,”94 Oduyoye asserts. This has serious implications for the nature of salvation, as who salvation comes from, in part, contributes to its understanding and efficacy. It reintroduces the question of Jesus as victor in his salvation – if his salvific work is not victorious in masculinist ways, what would it mean to think salvation, “feminine,” “womanly,” or “motherly”?95

The inclusiveness of women in the salvific characterization of Jesus Christ proves empowering and subversive in more diverse ways than originally put forth. It creates room for salvation to come forth in ways unbeknownst to humanity or at least uncommonly considered within ecclesial circles or theological spaces.

Jesus Christ as feminine is a sign of salvation for African women (and ultimately, men). Oduyoye pushes the agenda to socially and soteriologically feminize Christ in assessing his decisions to choose the least, the most overlooked, tasks and positions within society as “He himself undertook much that was seen as women’s roles and

94 Ibid, 83.
95 In these claims I am not equating womanhood or motherhood with the ability to reproduce or to physically create life but more in the vein of providing nurturance.
Jesus’ willingness to take on that which would not be typically understood as masculine suggests that his power might move through other means and characterizations.

Oduyoye is assertive that Jesus lived into more than masculinity; He also took up and thrived within feminine ways of existing. She puts the proposition for Christological consideration in front of us that Christ is in fact quite feminine and aligned with women in ontological ways. There is correlation between the work of Jesus and the work and labor of women within African social contexts. Jesus’ salvific works on the earth were mediated through women’s socializations, meted through women’s work, and channeled through that which was relegated as feminine. The Savior embraced the feminine. Salvation can, in fact, come through women. Salvation, in this way, is a mode of liberation.

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97 Ibid. Though Oduyoye purports a message of an anti-patriarchal Christ attentive to the presence and needs of women, her rhetoric seems to be reaching in some places. She works hard to prove the full inclusion of women in every interaction Jesus has with women in the Gospels. She argues that Mary and Martha’s relationship to Jesus was literally one of life and death as “Jesus was, for them, life.” But what must be parsed out is how Jesus is life for them. Jesus is life for them in his ability to resurrect their brother. Does this send a message that is fundamentally patriarchal? That Jesus only matters to women only insomuch as he can make alive the males in their lives? Does Jesus only matter to Mary and Martha through Lazarus? Or is there a connection between kinship and how it serves as a life-form in itself in this culture? Is the message more cultural than patriarchal? Is the emphasis on family and relationality living rather than patriarchal forms of relationality living? Perhaps it can be argued as Jesus rejected Martha’s domestic duties, to which Oduyoye asks “Was Jesus downgrading domestic hospitality?” Perhaps there is an inversion, a reversal happening here where women are its central characters: what is life, what Jesus resurrects, is community. Perhaps a feminist message is present in Jesus’ interactions with Mary and Martha. It is uncertain but certainly an objective of Oduyoye in this article.
Women’s words about Christ are soteriologically telling as well, whether the church fully recognizes it as so. Oduyoye continues to note the requirement of women in the Lord’s salvific work in the world as “we see women’s faith and faithfulness” most brilliantly in narratives of the resurrection. The victory of Christ, in colonial resistance, and through this - through gender inclusiveness - is a sign and signal of resurrection, for resurrection involves women. Oduyoye touts scripture as helpful in narrating the importance of women in discerning Christ’s purpose in the world and for the church. During their visitation to the tomb and not finding him there, the women who received instruction from the angels were given the task of spreading the message of Jesus’ resurrection after the third day. Oduyoye calls this message, “the burden” while “the tradition was against them.” She further points out, “Their witness carried little weight in the courts of the country.” Even the account in the book of Matthew Oduyoye notes, “seems to be an attempt to explain how the stone came to be rolled away.” Unfortunately, the women’s word of resurrection did not hold much weight on its own. It had to be validated, verified, or explained into existence. In the Matthew passage, Jesus’ appearance confirms his resurrection. A man had to back the words of the women. The women could not, would not, be believed on their own. They needed

100 Ibid, 89.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
maleness to confer their words as truth. The problem of gender entrapment within a narrative of liberation is the aspect of Jesus’ victory the church would do well to notice and name.

This mode of sociality is the exact entry point in which Jesus disrupts masculinist discourse around the nature and shape of just action, holy work, and salvific pre-eminence. Amongst the women, their sociality, their work, their words, is where God enfleshed can be found. “We observe that African women’s Christology derives directly from the Gospels highlighting women’s presence in the life and teaching of Jesus. The cultural hermeneutic out of which they reflect, enables them to see the ambiguities of the Jesus model as culture-coded and therefore open to transformation.”

Oduyoye is right. The presence of women in scripture is formative for African women’s Christological perspective and hermeneutic. They are easily able to recognize the impact of culture in scripture and contextually read the words and work of Christ for their culture.

Christ must be read from the context of those encountering him. And this remains true today, in any society across time, especially for women. Christ being victorious over detrimental realities such as colonial oppression and gender discrimination requires women’s hermeneutical perspective. Women are a constant in the working out of Christological detail and doctrine. They are involved in the understanding of who the church, past and present, understand Jesus Christ to be. This

is significant as it suggests that women are valuable and necessary in any doctrinal hermeneutic, exercise, or expression. Women are needed in order for the church to understand who Christ is and what work he has done (and is doing), because in his interactions with them, the church learns what divine relationality looks like and what it points the church towards.

**Revisiting the Question**

Oduyoye’s proposals are many towards how African women imagine Jesus Christ, but even in this a critical question remains: What does African women’s Christology reach towards? What is its end goal around the depiction of Jesus Christ and of African women? We can see what it is not - it is not a mission to locate God; that God and theology proper exists is already known and found in African cultural perspective. African religious sensibility, Christian and otherwise, has no problem holding a narrative of God.

The feminist perspective within African theology helps us see that it is in fact the women within African culture who have God right, who in fact know God-enfleshed quite well. The point is not to parse out whose version of God and/or godliness reigns most supreme. To engage in these tactics of comparison is to become caught in epistemological entanglements that can breed and perpetuate hierarchical and suppressive theological practice.
Jesus Christ is a figure advocating for the full humanity of every human being. For Oduyoye “the Christian liberation of African women is necessary if Jesus Christ is to be credible…” Thus, instead of asking “Who is Christ for the African Woman?” as I started off with, I conclude that African feminist Christology actually asks, “Who is the African woman in Christ?” This reversal sets up a claim that everyone’s experiences detail the ways in which the world knows Christ. It is through the movement of human life that theology’s details take shape and become clearest. It is in inquiry of human existence as creation and creatures of God that theology fleshes itself out and begins to reveal itself and make some semblance of sense. It is through participating in the inquiries of the human condition and human-being that theology unfolds and reveals itself as much as humanity can hold. Thus, in turning to Oduyoye’s (and subsequently African women’s) theological anthropology, African women’s theology and Christology become more cemented not only as doctrinal truth, but also as foundational precepts to understanding God and thus the foundation of life itself.

Chapter Five | Who God Says We Are: Theological Anthropology and Creation as Witness

Our stories are precious paths on which we have walked with God, and struggled for a passage to our full humanity.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

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Characters in a Story

The details of human being, human life together, emerges in story. The manner through which human relation is conveyed suggests a critical link between the action of life and the significance of telling life’s details. Story narrates not only the doing of life, but the scope of its meaning. Creatively and imaginatively narrating origin, story can convey the essence of identity.¹

For Africans, creation myths are the mode of story that hold the crux of the human condition: that created-ness carries meaning in itself, that human purpose is best known in recounting the plotline of human life. Creation stories constitute the narrative of existence and manner of being, but most importantly, they explain relational intention. The hermeneutics, or interpretive means, applied to creation stories form the

¹ For a thorough treatment of story influencing the patterns of African culture, see Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro’s Introduction to Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: A Key to African Women’s Liberation Theology (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002).
ground on which notions of proper and right relationality emerges. It is in these stories of beginning, that we comprehend the various dimensions of human relational boundaries.

In this chapter, Mercy Oduyoye walks through Akan conception of humanity and its dance with Christian expression. She explores human relationship through first examining from whence Akan understanding of divinity and humanity come, and then explores its workings in the Christian tradition and within Akan Christian expression. One theme speaks the loudest in her theological excavation: that the roots of patriarchy and sexism within theological anthropology are deep. Thus, in order to assert African women as critical figures in Christian theological thought, she attends to the many shades of this problem, especially what information patriarchy and sexism have planted within the Akan cosmological and Akan Christian imaginary.

She examines Akan conceptions of human togetherness, and she does this work under two umbrellas: The first centers around the notion of Christian faith as syncretic in nature. It can carry the best of both worlds. For the Akan, Western Christianity’s addition to their traditional religious cosmology has yielded a train of theological thought that informs the shape of a joined or multiplicitous theological anthropology. Christianity always joins with or into a culture; in this particular narrative, it makes no

\footnote{Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa} (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 130.}
difference whether it be Western or African. Christianity makes it home in
particularized ways of life.

Thus, syncretic practice is nothing new and not solely an African phenomenon.
For Oduyoye, the Akan Christianity to which she ascribes is equal parts Akan
cosmological thought and Christian thought because it has to be. To be Akan and
Christian does not denote leaving identity behind, but building upon identity, including
drawing aspects of Christianity into one’s current custom. Within this syncretic
exploration, we learn the shape of Akan worldview, its points of connection and
dissension with Western Christianity and Akan culture and see where and what
commentary it offers towards an Akan Christianity that honors both women and men.
In it, we see how Oduyoye and African women read where race and gender have been
imposed upon an Akan Christian syncretic worldview.

Under the second umbrella we see African women’s response more in depth. In
it, Oduyoye asserts Akan Christianity’s truest character being expressed in its granting
women relevance and voice. Cultural norms and religious thought working as co-
determining factors affecting African persons affects African women the most. The
issues brought upon African women by Christian and Akan religious custom can be
attended to through close examination of both faith traditions’ principles of divine and
human relationship. Oduyoye works carefully to identity the where and how
anthropology has gone wrong and has abandoned Akan and Christian principles about communal value and worth as it pertains to women.

In this chapter Oduyoye not only names how to understand and see human life as a demonstration of right religious custom, but also confronts their imbalances and shortcomings. She illumines these towards an African women’s theological anthropology of inclusion as right theological anthropology, for it reveals the contours of human boundary and divine determination and intent. For Oduyoye, and for African women, the solution to sexism within both Akan cosmology and Western Christianity, and further, in Akan Christianity, emerges from a proper understanding and conceptualization of human life.

Creation should witness to divine working, and not necessarily attempt to historicize, customize, and operate from a place of dominance as a witness to its divine power. An African women’s theological anthropology adds clarity to the divine-human ordering of life.

**Conjoining Humans: An Akan Christian Overview**

For the Akan people of Ghana, as with many other African cultures, the conception of life springs forth from the understanding of humanity’s relationship to the divine and to others. Story offers this; it clarifies purpose. It assigns meaning to communal hopes, values, desires and aspirations. It serves as a reminder of one’s origin and of the structure of relationship.
Within Akan tradition, one’s relationship with God determines their relationship with themselves, with another, and with creation as a whole. The communal relationship to God determines Akan notions of interpersonal relationships. Thus, any interpretive mishandling of God’s role in relation to humanity proves a point of departure in Akan understandings of the divine. God must be considered the starting point from which the understanding of life emerges. To stray from this reality is to imbibe oneself with a false practice of inscribing life at will. For the Akan, to conceive of life apart from a divine center is to abandon life itself.

For Oduyoye, Christianity and Akan cosmology are not necessarily opposites of each other but have some ideas in common; both hold the centrality of the divine as a permanent fixture in its belief system. Akan thought and Christian viewpoint do have some similar values; the variation in both is merely contextual. As an Akan woman who identifies as Christian, Oduyoye is in a prime position from which to argue further that Christian theology needs Akan cosmology to live into the fullest expression of itself. Akan cosmological thought is not the sole religious tradition with this level of importance; its role as a contextual entity is what transforms Christianity away from a Western colonial faith system towards a theological faith tradition that particular peoples can have claim upon.

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Akan Christianity, Oduyoye’s particular faith custom aware and attentive to all its constituents, illumines how the spiritual structures of Akan theological belief are not too different or distant from Christian structural belief. Her theological anthropology is an exercise in making Akan cosmolony and Christian belief speak to each other; this affirms African religious structure as critical in light of Christianity’s strong historical presence in West Africa as cultural determinant or as a tool of cultural assimilation. For Oduyoye, Akan theology does not fade behind the presence of Christian theology—they build into the truths of each other.

Oduyoye’s syncretic leanings are demonstrated in her claims that Akan worldview provides the reasoning and cosmological structure that undergirds Akan Christian belief. Christianity in its purest essence is a faith tradition illustrating divine creation and purpose. Akan religious worldview achieves this measure from the particularity of Akan life and perspective. Akan life patterns are not vastly different from those of the Christian faith. With each, the divine is the center around which the remainder of life circulates. The problem that many African women run up against comes in the hermeneutical disruption of this ordering. For Oduyoye this disruption is the problem of anthropocentric theological standpoint; it is in straying away from theocentrism, a notion essential to Christian, Akan, and Christian Akan religious custom alike.
Oduyoye, like many of her male predecessors such as E. Bolaji Idowu and Kwesi Dickson, reminds us that theology is not solely a Christian ordering of beliefs and expression of such, it is a logic of divine arrangement and relational sequence. Africans have always operated with a system of understanding the human and the divine. Africans have always understood their life under a Supreme Being. To concede theology as a European invention delimits African traditional religious custom, colonizing and wrongly relegating modes of thought to particular cultural origins. God has always been active in African history. Theology has always been a system of thought amongst Africans.

**Understanding Humans: Akan Cosmological Thought**

The Akan think dualistically about how the self should relate to the world around it. The two dimensions of the spiritual and the physical guide their conceptions of life. African traditional religions researcher, Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye argues that for the Akan the physical world consists of “the environment and the secular activities that go on in it. The spiritual is the invisible or immaterial dimension of life.” In Akan culture, the spiritual realm consists of ancestral beings and deities acting as personal spirit beings impacting and guiding life events, but also includes other impersonal

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forces conjured from distinctive practices including sorcery, magic, and witchcraft that introduce instability and harm. All have the ability to impact human life, but all fall in line within the hierarchy that God, the Supreme Being, creates.⁶

Within Akan belief, the physical and spiritual worlds are interconnected. Harmony between both is central to Akan worldview. There is no such thing as the separation of spiritual and secular life - both live within each other. Life in harmony with the living and with the spiritual beings of the cosmos serves as moral compass and ethical guide within Akan cultural life.⁷ In Western consideration, the Akan expression of the religious might be deemed polytheistic, but it functions no differently than some manifestations of the Christian faith.

Ghanaian pastoral and practical theologian, Esther Acolatse asserts the religious structural overview of the Akan as cosmologically tiered; it is full of various classes of spirits. The spiritual realm has its own hierarchy where the Creator of all things - the Supreme Being - demonstrates their power through the divine pantheon of other gods. The spirits of the inanimate, such as rocks, trees, and charms as well as the spirits of ancestors are also in full consideration of Akan spirituality, but in a lesser sense than the Supreme Being.⁸

⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid, 255-256.
⁸ Esther Acolatse, For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 60. The ancestors are second only to the Supreme Being in Akan spirituality. Their
Akan culture incites relationship of mutual respect between human beings, spiritual beings, the Creator God, as well as other created beings, such as land, particular animals, forest, and bodies of water, known as the “minor deities.” Occupying status as a created being is a precarious way of experiencing life, as one’s life is completely dependent on the movement and status of the rest of creation. One’s life cannot be considered isolated from the Supreme Being or their creation in any way.

Human being in relation to the divine is thus important, as the cycle of human life is determined by the Creator. Humans were created by the Creator God as complex, multilayered beings. Human beings in Akan worldview contain blood (mogya), body (nnipadua), soul (kra) and spirit (sunsim). No matter what version of deity or human origin story, the soul is the crux of full human being. The soul is that which God grants every human being. It is not only an entity that is traditionally considered both male and female, but it is that which fuels one’s life-blood. It funds living and the ability intercession is the means of the Akan’s experiencing favor in the earthly realm. Serving in mediating roles, the pantheon of gods are also a means of experiencing the favor of the Supreme Being.

9 Ibid, 61.
11 Kofi Asare Opoku, “The Destiny of Man in Akan Traditional Religious Thought,” from Traditional Life, Culture and Literature in Ghana (Owerri: Conch Magazine Limited, 1976), 15. Opoku’s conceptions can be read as either as either dated or androcentric as his identification with humanity is expressed through the gendered label of “man.” He also asserts that the life cycle is one of “birth, puberty, marriage, death and regeneration.” This precludes women to hold life purpose outside of that which her body is useful for: marriage in order to ensure reproduction.
12 “kra” can also be known as “9kra”.
to lead a good life. Each person holds self-consciousness—personality—but their soul
is that which is not only a source of energy, but also “the repository of man’s
instinct…thus also man’s guardian spirit.” The body and the soul are interconnected to
the point that “what happens to the body also affects the kra,” the soul. Though
impacted, the body is less important than the soul or the spirit (or the personal soul) of a
person, for the soul contains “the spirit-breath” or the honhom.

**Classifying Humans: Relation to the Divine in Akan Worldview**

Like other people groups and faith traditions, how the Akan know and
experience God comes from the particularity of their experience of the divine within
their people group. God relates particularly, but also universally; just as God is known
in Christian (Abrahamic) creation accounts, the Akan have their own creation accounts
that illumine the specifics of their cosmology and the activity of divinity within such.
God being known uniquely for the Akan opens up consideration for a diverse
epistemology of the divine. For the Akan, God is known through their cultural grounds.

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14 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 64.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid, 35. Like Acolatse, I will be using “worldview” synonymously with “cosmology” to mean “the deep
underlying structure and logic of a people’s way of living in the world.”

This then suggests that how one experiences the cosmos and the divine is interchangeable with
how one imagines their movement within the world and way of life as a people. In other words, this
meaning suggests, that the divine is primarily known through people, through embodiment, through
culturally specific embodiment. It suggests cosmology as contextual. Even if notions of the divine are
universally implicated, it is done so in various ways based on people group and culture.
Acolatse argues the inseparability of African culture from African conceptions of the religious. Within the Akan people specifically, she asserts that African religion “...plays a significant role in culture, and thus in worldview.”\(^\text{19}\) How she employs worldview borrows from the anthropologist Michael Kearney’s understanding where “worldviews classify the reality with which they are presented...”\(^\text{20}\) He specifies, “Above all a worldview deals with causality, answering fundamental questions regarding origins and power.”\(^\text{21}\) How the Akan see the world is based simultaneously on the flow of life events and a common understanding of what \textit{should be} according to cultural beliefs. Kearney further states,

...a people’s worldview, especially their understanding of the relationship of the cosmos to themselves, is so ingrained and inheres at such a subconscious level of the psyche that it is difficult to change. At best, it may be modified from time to time, but only by the people themselves.

It is rooted in patterns of life, of what is expected and what should be, based on cultural foundation.\(^\text{22}\) It is arguably belief system itself. Worldview and cosmology are thus intertwined to the point where they need each other to hold meaning. How one knows God is through one’s body and in one’s life. These experiences in such manners comprise worldview as cosmological stance.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 32.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 34.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
African religion and cultural determination are deeply intertwined. Religion can be understood as a cultural manifestation in itself. It signals how people are navigating interpersonal relationality amongst themselves and with divinity. The joined-ness of culture and religion demonstrate how the religious faculties of the Akan are extensions of social worldview. We should not parse the two but think them together in order to comprehend them.

For Africans, religion is the evidence, the working out of culture. It is the demonstration of cultural modes of thought and being. The point is to illustrate how inseparable ways of life in community and ways of being and living under the divine are interconnected. This distinction is crucial to make; Africans are not compartmentalized beings who individuate aspects of their lives from each other, rather, they are peoples who trust the interconnectedness of ordinary and divine life and expression. The Akan, in this specific example, do not isolate communal practice from religious precept; both are joined.

Contextualization is thus a determining factor of religious positioning and cultural standpoint. As Acolatse argues, “Attempts at contextualization must, therefore,  

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take note of the possibility of syncretism.” The interwoven-ness of context and cultural expression, especially the religious, suggest that African conceptions of the self are impossible to determine apart from another (an other). This almost interpolative move suggests created-ness of being by virtue of its being in relation to the words, the summoning, the calling forth of existence by another. The self emerges in response to the divine being’s self and determination of an other.

The Christian creation story, whether attributed to Hebrew origin or not, is both culturally unique and yet universal. The Akan have their own origin stories that do not deviate too far from that which undergirds those of the Christian faith tradition. One of their most popular ones is the story of Ananse Kokroko who mediates the problem of fighting between “Half and Half” by slamming them together making one human being out of the two. In this, the Akan express God’s “direct involvement in order to transform a situation of disharmony.” But what is also clearly present in this origin story is the multifarious nature of human being. Humans are made of two halves. They are not

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considered merely female or merely male, but how God is introduced into Akan cultural
consciousness also introduces the manner of human being as combined being. Human
being is the expression not only of God’s desire and God’s power, but also of existential
multiplicity. One is not simply female or male, but one is a product of God’s combining
many modes of being into one expression called person.

Within the Akan Christian framework God is the Supreme Being and Creator of
all living beings, divine and otherwise. “Without God nothing holds together,” Oduyoye
ascribes.28 No matter what account resonates most, one factor remains consistent: it is at
the end of God’s words that human being exists in completion. Human being is a divine
command. It is evidence of the life that God’s word holds. God’s words hold worlds.
Human being is the evidence of the life-creating power of the word(s) of God. It
witnesses to the creative power of the Supreme Creator God pointing back to its source
and declaring that source, mighty.

For Oduyoye, then, the speaking forth of creation is a rescue effort of sorts; God
delivers the universe from chaos out of God’s compassion by speaking life into
existence. Creation is God’s desire, decision, and effort to “redeem matter from
formlessness” and to make a new thing “out of the chaotic old.” 29

28 Ibid, 90.
**Seeing Humans: Akan Cosmology from A Woman’s Point of View**

For women, the problem with Akan cosmological worldview is that creation narratives directly impact cultural formation and norms. Myths and folktales can directly shape social relations; in this, they can and sometimes do serve as a source of discrimination and marginalization for Akan women. Oduyoye claims that myths, storytelling, and creation accounts have socializing influence and can reinforce “the image of woman as well as constitute[e] the justification for their ascribed roles.” In Akan creation narratives that explore the separation between humanity and God, women have often been blamed as progenitors of humanity’s ill fate. In Akan mythology, division and separation between the sky (God) and humans was the consequence of a woman’s insolence and greed, her taking too much from God, and

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31 Amba Oduyoye, “The Asante Woman: Socialization through Proverbs (Part I),” *African Notes: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 01/1979*, Volume 8, Issue 1, p. 5 especially 5-6. Proverbs can also serve as a source of pursuing equality such as the saying, “Nnipa nyinaa Ye Onyame nna, obi nyasaase ba” meaning, “All people are the children of God, no person is a child of the earth.” But, Oduyoye carefully notes, proverbs of these sort that uplift persons and purport “justice, peace and harmony are few and far between.”

32 Ibid, 5.

33 See Samuel Kwesi Nkansah, “The Quest for Climactic Sanity: Re Reading of Akan Creation Myth,” *Language In India, 08/2012*, Volume 12, Issue 8, p. 370. An interesting note: though Nkansah labels these various accounts, “creation myths,” in Christian ideation they more so attend to what would be “the fall” or original sin. They are not necessarily origin stories, but perhaps can be something more akin to proverbial stories explaining the course of Divine-human relations. To collapse the lapserian circumstances of humanity’s separation from God into the creation account of humanity is to imply that God’s creative initiation is embedded in sin, which can be a kind of theological mishandling. In his work, Nkansah’s approach in his recounting the fundamentals of Akan culture is from an environmental standpoint, and not a theological one. I find his mythical accounts or proverbial accounts helpful to further demonstrate the narrative conceptions Oduyoye’s work moves against.
thus causing God to move further and further away from humanity. Because of this the root of humanity’s displacement from God is the result of the actions and intentions of women. Two other mythical accounts, however, attribute the actions of a human collective as that which forced God’s separation. In sum, out of the five myths, in three accounts God is “pushed away” through the affective, in expressing annoyance or disgust – only one of which implicates the actions of an old woman. The other two

34 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 68 & Samuel Kwesi Nkansah, “The Quest for Climactic Sanity: Re Reading of Akan Creation Myth,” *Language In India*, 08/2012, Volume 12, Issue 8, p. 370, especially 376. Though the focus is not in this vein, it is critical to note how out of the five origin stories of the Akan, three of them not only place the blame of humanity’s downfall solely on women, but the surrounding factors of her role in such prove troubling.

Though Nkansah reads these creation myths towards a different purpose, its implications for theology are numerous. From an African feminist critical perspective, three things are crucial to note: First, the trouble-maker being an older woman reminiscent and reinforcing the widowhood or singleness in women as indicative of witchcraft or evil work – in this case, she is a caricature evil enough to even repel the Creator from humanity.

Second, the women in both accounts are seemingly alone and act individually. It is in the violation of Akan cultural values of community that her individual selfish action both repels God and shames her culture. She violates not only divinity, but her people’s humanity as well. Further, her acting alone signals the blame falling squarely on her shoulders. Unlike the creation account of the Christian tradition where Adam is summoned to partake in sinful (disobedient) action, these two women are working and acting alone with no one to tempt into temptation, especially men. Men are absolved of all guilt and part in the downfall of humanity.

Third, in all accounts, the female antagonist is physically harming the Creator God (Nyame) by taking too much from or of God. God’s impassibility is not a factor, as it is in the Christian tradition. God is close enough to humanity that God can be impacted, harmed even, by the actions of God’s creation. These three women are narrative instances where women are depicted as actively harming the Creator.

A smaller detail to note concerns the domestic situations in which these women are narrated to occupy in which they ruin humanity’s previously strong and functional relationship with God. It might not be a coincidence that these women violate God while in domestic roles/positions. In the gathering and preparation of food by women, God is harmed.

Oddly enough it is within the paradigm of sustaining life that these women are assigned the downfall of human being and charged with the action that pushed God away. These women are thus positioned as doubly offensive, accused of selfish pursuit leading to the detriment of all parties involved. In other words, to put it plainly, the mythos of women’s self-centeredness and “natural” inclinations are cemented not only against God but also against the Akan community. These things about these women, and perhaps even the essence of the women themselves, run counterintuitive to God’s intention for humanity, and especially Akan culture.
invoke humanity as a whole. In the other two accounts, God is actually harmed by women. In this train of thought patriarchal cultural assumptions and practices are verified as correct and positioned as corrective response to the history of the culture. Patriarchal suppression is not an evil consigning submission onto women, but it is an expression of relational disorder reinforced as cultural standard.

Oduyoye understands that the division between human beings who believe they can determine the value of other humans is a result of a displaced understanding of the self. This misunderstanding leads to adopting false definitions of another unfortunately mirroring the pattern of gendered relationship among Christians, including Africans. The source of this division, greatest between men and women, is fundamentally a theological epistemological error.

Culture has served as an unsavory determinant of human placement and relationship. Some cultures cannot imagine women’s roles exceeding their reproductive capability and roles. The cultural hermeneutics of African peoples serve as an unfortunate barrier to Africans knowing the fullness of theological truth Musimbi Kanyoro argues in her work. Oduyoye notes that women were, “created neuter with the possibility of differentiation,” but this possibility of difference did not serve as

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threat.\textsuperscript{38} She continues, “the Creator expected us to learn to appreciate, respect and value one another as primarily human.”\textsuperscript{39}

Differentiation was never intended to be a point of departure between females and males. Rather, it was merely present to serve as a reminder of God’s choice, God’s decision and the detail of God’s action. If difference can be seen as a detail of God’s action, what richness might theological anthropological perspective gain? In line with Oduyoye’s train of thought which resists demonizing difference, I want to suggest that difference signaling distinction rather than opposition grounds theological anthropology in a communal understanding of relationality reminiscent of Trinitarian relationship. Mutuality can still exist even amidst difference. Difference was never a barrier to mutuality, but a pathway towards it. It should work to illumine the co-existence of variant, yet interdependent created beings. Difference, then, is not a weapon, but can and has been weaponized when appropriated towards hierarchical means.\textsuperscript{40}

Akan wisdom assumes all persons as children of God who are, then, assumed as desired by God.\textsuperscript{41} Traces of the divine are present in each person. This is not something to be regulated, but known and celebrated in its fullness. Yet the reality of this divine shared-ness, the divine nature present in all, does not align with the treatment of women

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 66-67.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 69.
justified by theological rationale. Women’s identity is often used against them – no doubt traceable back to the actions of Eve.\textsuperscript{42}

A "doctrine of man" is the unjust pattern of thought by which discrimination is sentenced upon “the humanity of women.”\textsuperscript{43} Interpretations of the Hebrew creation narrative that privilege men over women have relegated the blame of sin to women and justify women’s experiences of suffering.\textsuperscript{44} But what this configuration implies is that God’s creative action in creating both female and male can be permanently negated by the actions of such created beings. It nullifies God’s creative intention, innovation, and power instead of allowing Christological redemption to restore full agency and power to God’s creative intent.

A “doctrine of man” suggests that the Messiah had little to no curative impact on the trajectory of human life; Jesus Christ did not truly restore human life to its full and true potential.\textsuperscript{45} This theologically alarming position moves to justify the maltreatment of women in the name of biased hermeneutics. The question then becomes: what undergirds this archaic hermeneutical position funding the theological mistreatment of women?

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 67.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 71. Oduyoye argues that Jesus unveiled that women were created beings representative of full humanity.
Feminism and a feminist viewpoint on these matters, especially coming from the experiences of African women, speak to this not as an extension of Western feminist voice, but as a movement in its own right for understanding humanity’s full potential.\textsuperscript{46} African women are necessary interlocutors to address the tensions and problems found in such harmful theological anthropological positions.

\textit{Thinking Humans: Naming Imbalance}

Akan cosmology is not itself immune from gendered hierarchy. Male is still considered superior to female. Oduyoye does not identify explicit reasoning behind this hierarchization outside of cultural naming and affiliation. What and how women and men are named in Akan culture impact how each are seen within the narrative of humanity’s relation to the divine. It has typically been said that man “includes” the woman, and therefore “maleness has been made to stand for humanness, and femaleness means either to be supportive of or to tamper with the male norm.”\textsuperscript{47}

The deficit within this theological anthropological conception comes when language is applied in such a way that women are culturally positioned as lesser beings without thorough examination of divine intent or regard for humanity as a whole. How people are spoken of transforms into a system of “natural” understanding. The problem of valuation emerges: can a created being determine the worth of another created being?

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\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 126.
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In parallel fashion to the pantheon of deities the power and determination of Nyame (God), women are positioned under the thumb of men. Men have speciously positioned themselves to be “the Supreme Being of human being.” But do men have the authority to claim power and ability that is reserved for their own Creator? For me, questions about the image of God and its application to both female and male become important to debate. Given the anthropological perceptive separation of male and female, if both female and male are made in God’s image, can the image of God be subordinated within itself? Does part of God’s image have to bow down to another part of itself? Does God’s being have lesser elements of itself that must be controlled and managed by others? In other words, what does this theological anthropology, in subordinating women, disclose about the Creator?

Concerning the purpose of human existence, Oduyoye is intentional in naming relationality as the anchor on which everything else holds. Right relationship is the source of her understanding not only of God, not only of an other, but also of herself. The intricacies of relationship as interdependent and interrelated are the essence of her anthropological position, as it summons forth an understanding of being that requires another in order to be. Even if it exists in cultural understanding and practices, human being cannot be done well, alone. It is through being a female, by being an Akan woman, that Oduyoye knows these intricacies of relationality so well. She is well aware

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48 Ibid.
that isolation-based and individual-focused or gender-hierarchical human relationship is dangerous. One cannot, must not, understand themselves without the other. One must not think themselves to exist superior to another. For women and men, the other must be a critical part to understanding the self.

Oddly enough, notions of gender difference has been shored up by practices of individualism. It has reinforced a belief of human distinction according to biological difference. Historically, African women have always had a different experience of understanding their humanity than their men did. Their understanding of the self, narrated as emerging in a narrative secondary-ness, was always disseminated through hierarchical distinction. But if we harken back to the Christian creation narrative at its basis, I argue, we see that to be female means to be created by God in a unique moment similar to the male, from pre-existing material (dirt/dust) that the created being is similar to yet varies from. On the other hand, through particular and gendered scriptural interpretation, we further glean that to be a woman means that one’s existence is seemingly positioned to be response (towards the man). Implied within this narration is the understanding that she occupies a flawed position in relation to the man and certainly in relation to the divine.

According to this certain theological narrative, to be a woman implies a mode of incompleteness at best, and existential deficit at worst. It means being a non-man, or rather it implies non-human-being. It mimics the arid dry-zone of existence that French
Antillean psychoanalyst, Frantz Fanon so poignantly names as indicative of hierarchical problems and colonial mentality. The notion of hierarchy is conclusive and common within African culture, including Akan culture. To reiterate a problematic standpoint joined to gender, if when a male child is born, the heavens are praised but when a girl comes into the world she is greeted with the disappointment of her non-fullness as a human being, this signals an asymmetrical anthropology to begin with, uneven in its considerations of what both female and male identity mean for cultural life and theological thought.

When the understanding of females’ beginning is marred with notions of insufficiency, what does her existence mean, then, for and about the movement and action of the Creator? What is being named as incorrect or faulty, in the moment of femaleness, the instance of female existence? Might we attribute dysfunction and deficit to God’s creative decision and creative faculties if females occupy this secondary form?

Religiously, this mode of thinking insinuates error in God’s ability and intention. Culturally, African thinking in this way asserts a skewed, yet foundational understanding of human being. For African women losing out through views found in their religion and culture, the narrative effects are damaging. The derisive account has been promoted as the following: God did not intend for woman to be incomplete, he

intended for man to embody existence towards completion. Woman’s incompleteness is merely an issue of her doing, or rather, of her imperfect being. Her inadequacy was not the intention, but the unfortunate consequence. God seemingly made man to be and provide the corrective to such an error, the norm of right embodied life. This error-filled life, then, requires woman’s subservience, demand her submission and obedience, and pre-determine the worth and function of her embodiment.

This reasoning serves as a means of asserting some semblance of right order and balance. Such existence in the world, one that keeps women within a paradigm of deficit, proves most divine. Keeping woman in the place of lack is deemed the riposte to her error-full existence. Keep her in lack as a reminder that the man is the necessary, good, and correct created being.

This is a completely narrow and incomplete view in itself, but if left unchecked, this anthropological position can be interpreted to have actual divine implications and meaning.

**Being Humans: The Problem of Anthropocentrism within Christian Theology**

The main problem with this train of thought and practice is that it functions as an anthropology of deficit and lack. It is an androcentric anthropology, an assertion of human being rooted in deploying an ethic of male uplift because of some fantastical perspective pitting women and men against one another. It asserts an anthropo-logic emergent from a place of singularity whose relational equivalent is considered
insufficient and incomplete. Relationship with God is misread as possible without another. Given these assertions, this paradigm fails to properly model the complexity and interrelatedness of what constitutes an apt theological instantiation of thought.

Christianity struggles with the places from which it takes its ontological cues. Christian theological anthropology cannot take relational formations as fixed or final if coming from the minds of created beings in isolation since human beings themselves are in the process of experiencing fullness and fulfillment and they do so, together – with the divine. God would not be needed if such relational constitutional certainty could come from outside of God’s self. And as Akan thought and Oduyoye have reminded us, for a theological anthropology to be, the necessity of God is imperative.

The Christian creation story in all of its universal implications is supposed to remind us that human being is by virtue of God’s action: God’s redemption, liberation, and salvation. God instantiates human community and in this, moves to correct aloneness. Being requires the hand of the Creator – creation is interdependent not only on itself, but first and primarily upon its Creator.51 Within the Christian tradition, the thrust of the fall, of the first created human beings turning away from God towards sin, points back to trusting God’s intention for humanity. Human beings seizing control of their path and creating a counter-trajectory misses relationality and positionality within divine-human relationship. The story of creation comes from the word(s) of God. Those

created—word-beings—would have a hard time discerning their life course apart from the author of creation. A faulty Christian theological anthropology asserts relational formation void of God’s presence, ordering, and consideration. But God’s voice is critical to understanding the purpose of human being and interrelationship. Oduyoye argues,

we do make a mess of our world when we ignore God’s voice and mis-use both the natural order and our human companions in the process of seeking our interests. The earth is the Lord’s, not ours, and hence there is a limit to how far we can bend it to suit ourselves. Contravening the laws that hold it together cannot but result in a return to the chaos from which it was created.52

The entirety of human being as creation itself is not removed from the rest of creation. Its redemption is connected to the redemption of all created things.

Redemption for humanity does not come from one source alone; this is the problem of asserting a patriarchal hermeneutical position as a theological anthropological corrective. This male-centered principle places maleness as a corrective to improper human being. This, then, begins to suggest that maleness is human and furthermore is a legitimate and sole response, and thus a corrective, to the lesser side of humanity, or femaleness. Maleness, “attempts to forestall being an unquestioning follower by swinging to the other end of the pendulum...becoming a being whose power to be

52 Ibid, 94.
depends on the non-being of others," Oduyoye reminds us.\textsuperscript{53} In order to assert itself as relevant, maleness moves/acts to cancel out those equal to itself (femaleness, created beings). It rejects community in order to gather significance unto itself. It illumines the fragmented understanding of human existence and a further flawed retrieval narrative supported by the illusion of the individual.

\textit{Incorporating Humans: Bodies and Difference}

We must turn our attention to how a theological anthropological standpoint that aims to punish women in skewed application also inversely bolsters and benefits men – the means to do so coming from considering how bodies work to either liberate or entrap persons towards certain roles and ends.\textsuperscript{54} Oduyoye comes in step with the thought-direction of Cameroonian Jesuit priest Engelbert Mveng when she speaks of the theological violence done to women based on their biology. In kind to Mveng’s major argument in \textit{L’Afrique dans l’Eglise: Paroles d’un Croyant}, Oduyoye asserts that a kind of anthropological violence is occurring when the humanity of women is systematically eliminated resulting in “anthropological impoverishment.”\textsuperscript{55} Women experience such violence not only through cultural or economic means, but also through hierarchy and

\textsuperscript{54} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Mythical Images” from \textit{Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 35. Oduyoye’s question to stances such as this is “for whose benefit?”
\textsuperscript{55} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Violence,” from \textit{Dictionary of Third World Theologies}, Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah, Eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 236. Though Mveng utilizes this brilliant ideation and categorization to explore the effects of the slave trade and colonialism on black persons and African and African diasporic life, these major ideas work well with Oduyoye’s position on the violence done to women and the type of erasure it enacts upon women’s voices and standpoints.
androcentrism in the religious sphere as well.\textsuperscript{56} These positions must be transformed through reviewing these foundations as faulty and detrimental to the fulfillment of communal wellness.

For Oduyoye “the fear of our bodies has made it difficult to accept the integrity of our being and led to the separation of our make up into material and spiritual, body and soul/spirit/mind.”\textsuperscript{57} Women’s bodies are integral to expressing women’s full humanity - as are men’s bodies towards their corporal expression. Both women and men move about in the world “rewarded and punished according to what they do with their humanity.”\textsuperscript{58} This should not warrant the lording of one over the other; it should encourage our reading being human as affixed to particular genres of existence. Human existence is dynamic, not static. To adhere to a male-centered anthropological

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 237.
\textsuperscript{57} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Introducing African Women’s Theology} (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 69. Though she names human sexuality as needed to be thoroughly treated, talked about and vetted, Oduyoye more so makes the case for gender consideration rather than one of sexuality. I am not suggesting that her insight is not a form of sexuality discourse, but according to the trajectory of her logic, her attention is most centered on gender formation, function, and misappropriation within theological discourse.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 70. Interestingly enough, Oduyoye asserts, “women posit that the female and male bodies are not complementary, as each is capable of expressing the fullness of humanness.” If women’s embodiment is not separated from the working of their spirit, soul and mind, then women’s beings can claim fullness in their embodied selves. What stems from this conclusive argument are questions around the purpose of companionship, in any form. Why hold relationship as crucial if there is not a possibility of complementary relationship? What might relationship be for if one holds the fullness of their being (not just the fullness of their bodies) and cannot gain or learn more from another? When purporting complementarianism elsewhere, why reject it here?

Oduyoye later states, “The male and female stand in relationship to each other as principles needing and responding to the fullness of the other.” This Barthian-sounding reading of human relationality most aligns with her theological position in her other work. What might explain this misstep is the nature of the \textit{Introducing African Women’s Theology} text. While it claims the ideas and voice of Mercy Oduyoye, it is comprised by an editorial team who, though reporting Oduyoye’s claims, extend their our summation of her findings. The inconsistency might be explained as an analytic error of Oduyoye’s competing yet complementary claims.
hermeneutic is choose stagnation over the dynamism of hearing equally from both the female and male perspective. Women’s voices emerge based on their embodied experiences providing diverse readings of human involvement in the world - and human being/being human involves embodied sexuality.

Taking up the biological critiques turned towards women’s bodies, Oduyoye assesses a logic of sexuality within theological anthropology through the interpretative lenses of the church fathers, particularly Tertullian and Gregory of Nyssa, who conceptualized women’s bodies as parallel to a stumbling block for men and a “necessary evil.” In these reflections women’s embodiment is only considered in light of its relationship to the men’s understanding of them as well as men’s own sexual shortcomings and limit. Women’s bodies, as sexed bodies, were considered agents that awakened sexual deviance in men; thus, women’s embodiment, in the past and in the present, poses a problem for men’s bodies and embodiment. The problem can be redirected in light of understanding the root of women’s embodiment within theological anthropology: embodiment is the culprit of what is characterized as aberrant and evil, but it is the embodiment of men that manages to project itself onto women and into the Christian imagination concerning human relationship. Men’s inability to correctly name and face their own bodies and its urges provides the foundation on which culture and

60 Ibid, 131.
modesty converge to create misunderstanding of the female’s embodied self in relationship to the divine and to other selves. It divides and positions female and male corporality as contesting one another, instead of necessitating one another.

Unfortunately culture and its subsequent practices can serve as reinforcements of these detrimental and determinant life patterns for both women and men. Women’s inferiority based on faulty interpretation of, confusion over, and lack of control over male embodiment has often been utilized to relegate women to physical usefulness alone. Since she is purported as a tarnished expression of the *Imago Dei*, her life, and her body, should be directed towards benefit for men as that is all she “good for.”\textsuperscript{61} Through being labeled the arbiter of sin, women are made to give up their agency of self-expression and movement in the world instead taking on a male-defined “status quo that defies analysis.”\textsuperscript{62}

Oduyoye has detailed previously how within Akan culture, the reproductive capabilities of a woman are demonstrative of the culture’s ability to survive and thrive. The continuation of the people is the communal desire. This understanding of women’s embodiment and bodily purpose is spiritualized, cemented into their consciousness, as a demonstration of God’s power within humanity. Being fruitful and multiplying, whether African cultural or Christian precept, encourages a message of continuous life,

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 130.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 121.
what Oduyoye details as a “sense of immortality that culture has created.” Thus, part of what African cultural perspective has determined is the theological purposing of women to be the carrier – spiritualizing their ability to procreate as their highest purposing. But if life is comprised around the reproduction of human life alone, the minutiae of the life lived in between in lost. God and other created beings are not experienced in the in-between of birth and death, but are only signs and signals of the machinated ontological mission of proliferation. True knowledge of life is lost if reproduction is symbolized as the sole or primary point of human being for women. At best, it suggests a sort of “success” at being human, but often, at the expense of women’s interior and social life. What might the purpose of life be outside of the continuation of more life, of life that exceeds life in this way? Might this (more) life encompass the full feeling and experience of this life, of this human existence?

**Reclaiming Humans: A True Theological Anthropology**

What, then, does or should a true Christian theological anthropology look like?

Christian theological anthropology is an understanding of human being, female and male, in relation to God. It is not males’ relationship to God and females; it is not females’ relationship to God and males. It acknowledges the depths of human existence and gives an account of human life in community with God and with other created beings.

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beings. A singular perspective, of either male or female, over and against everything else or vice versa, is neither helpful nor useful.\textsuperscript{64}

Theological anthropology is the criteria by which humans understand themselves in light of whom God created them to be. The Creator God is the centripetal force by which other relationship and relationalities are parsed out, separated, are made distinct as that which has pre-determined form and content. God is the driving force for human beings to understand who they are.

It is fitting then, that for Oduyoye’s culturally specific exploration of theological anthropology, human connectedness and interrelationship is central as it relates to divine relationship. It is also critical that her approach to considering the question of human being and life within such a mode of existence takes contextuality and particularity seriously. The range of experiences of human being can shed light on the areas of its misinterpretation and those in need of correction. Theological anthropology affixed to the wrong foundation can provide a deficient understanding of God, of one’s self, and of another.

Oduyoye argues that the creation/creative accounts in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis serve as a corrective to the way the world currently operates. Its purpose is not to offer a literal explanation of created life, but to serve as a reminder of

\textsuperscript{64} This notion of collective humanity in relation to the divine stayed with me through the ideas presented over the course of the semester in Willie Jennings “Doctrine of Creation” course in the Fall 2014 as her thinks alongside the ideas presented in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s, \textit{Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3}. 

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one’s created-ness. It centers God as a counter to hierarchical thinking of the creature. It calls out the sins that both matriarchy and patriarchy assert in its structure of thinking, it exposes humanity’s appropriation of God’s centrality in human community.

The communal, critical in the instantiation of human being, is germane to proper human living. To further a premise of male superiority is to rattle the foundations of God’s creative action. The emphasis on action instead of order is intentional. While some hermeneutical perspectives advocate the position of male superiority based on God’s creative order, the timing of certain modes of human existence is not as critical as human action. Human being was created to be in relationship and community, not to rank itself as superior or inferior based on factors outside of its control. For Oduyoye, this is the purpose behind the emphasis of koinonia within Christianity community. It is human community with and in God.

For humanity to move outside of the paradigm that “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world and those that dwell therein,” is to fall into the trap of abusing God’s creation and mishandling God’s intention for humanity and creation at large.

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65 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 95. One might ask, what might the sins of matriarchy be? A culture that works to protect the entire community, especially its women counting them highly visible within and important to their society is not a mirroring of patriarchal culture, but arguably exists as a correction to it. While this is true, as mentioned in chapter one of this dissertation it is evidenced that even within matriarchal culture, patriarchal elements of treatment towards women are still heavily present and prevalent. Thus, perhaps the “sins” of matriarchal culture and matrilineality that are present have more to do with its internal patriarchal elements implicative of patriarchal and hierarchical systems of relationality at work that does not privilege God as the highest source of love and relational importance.


67 Psalm 24:1, NRSV.
Human being moves towards its foremost expression when in line with the Creator God. To read the creation narratives too literally, so as to accuse and assign blame unfairly, can often “stifle theological content and… [bury] the chance for real reflection.” A complex understanding of the storyline of creation myths imparts the reality that no matter the (seeming) individual components of sin’s emergence and presence within humanity, the body of humanity is present, represented, and thus implicated not only in its manifestation, but also in movement towards its eradication. Human being, as a whole, shares the identity of the created story. This allows for a more holistic theological anthropology where women are not only considered part of the whole, but where the logic of human curative action can be a communal reality.

**Particularizing Humans: Akan and Woman**

For Oduyoye the realities of being Akan, woman, and Christian are evident in the foundations of her theological anthropology. Her approach to building it is, wisely, Afro-centric. It centers communal inclusion and wellness as theological task, as theological telos. Since the aim of religion is to create balanced life between humanity as well as to the divine, Akan cosmological thought’s embeddedness in Oduyoye’s Akan Christian theological exploration and conclusion moves her theological anthropology to rail against a harmful patriarchal hermeneutic by highlighting truths living in both Akan

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culture and Christian precept. She argues for impartial cosmological ordering of thought. In this format, humanity’s place is primarily known and seen in accordance with its positionality to the Divine, not in constructed gender relational sequence. In this syncretic move of principle and practice she privileges African culture and worldview in order to not only enhance Christian praxis, but also to fully include the best of Akan culture within its Akan Christian form. She does so by utilizing Akan culture’s beneficial elements while fighting against its patriarchal-hermeneutical forms. Her anthropological perspective is wrestling against the dual patriarchal demons of African and Western culture – those systems of belief that create double the burden for African women⁶⁹ - and she does so through concentrating focus on a key tenet found within both: communal wholeness.

Oduyoye draws attention to the reality often overlooked by African male theologians: that African and Akan religious faith are not free of their own patriarchal foundations.⁷⁰ Though Akan Christianity learned new means of enforcing gender inequality from the Christian faith and the cultures from which it emerged and spread, it

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⁷⁰ Ibid, 17 & Kofi Asare Opoku, “The Destiny of Man in Akan Traditional Religious Thought,” from Traditional Life, Culture and Literature in Ghana (Owerri: Conch Magazine Limited, 1976), 18. Amenga-Etego identifies a point of view that names women as vulnerable to “corruption, manipulation, and even possession by other spirit beings.” This imaging of women draws a line of distinction between women’s spiritual and moral ability and moral susceptibility in damaging ways. Oduyoye has also argued before how it is still quite common to position women against Christian values and alignment with harmful religious practice such as witchcraft in order to affect women’s credibility and fate (and speaks to the exposure of their sunsum, or spirit).
is not innocent of its own problems. Oduyoye is not afraid to name the issues of sexism present within both Akan cosmological and Akan Christian belief.

In her asserting the fullness of Akan women Oduyoye, however, also chooses to illumine Akan Christianity’s positive potential: its focus on communal well-being. She intentionally centers the foundation of Akan worldview in order to demonstrate how it can, from a women’s perspective, impart wisdom and useful principles towards a fuller and proper understanding of Christian theological anthropology. She does this by being an intervention of sorts through her theological vocality. She argues that if for Africans, “the Creator expected us to learn to appreciate, respect and value one another as primarily human,” then the common ground of humanity should be the place from which theological anthropology emerges. Within Akan custom, the ontological importance of women can also be utilized to build an equitable and positive theological anthropology.

Akan women must be interlocutors in Akan Christianity’s outworking. Oduyoye lifts these truths up in her own voice (and does so continentally in lifting up the voices of other African women). Women, critical within Akan culture must also be critical to Akan Christianity. In asserting this, Oduyoye creates space for women’s full inclusion in the identities of “Akan” and “Christian.” She creates space to be equally considered in

conceptions of communal wellness. She includes women in the notion of Akan community and thus in the shaping and reworking of Akan culture, including its Christian manifestation.

Oduyoye asserts a Ghanaian cultural claim on her theological viewpoint, and one that honors the fullness of African personhood. Her approach to doing and conceiving of theology is feminist in nature and Akan in origin. She pushes her predecessors further, and rightly so. The issue with theology is not solely the result of problematic colonialist religious impositions, but of gendered imbalance within African culture before and after Christian influence.

Oduyoye’s feminist stance argues for an understanding of humanity that urges a “wholeness of community as made up of male and female beings.” She holds no interest in structures of ontological ordering that are man-made, but seeks “expressions of humanity…to shape a balanced community within with each [male and female] will experience a fullness of Be-ing.” She is aware of the reality of gender imbalance within African traditional religions, but she is also clear to name this same problem as prevalent

73 Ibid, 12-13. Though many argue that the feminist standpoint is Western in origin and nature, Oduyoye argues differently. Women have been speaking out about cultural values that harm or disadvantage them before what would be Western-ly designated as “feminism” came into African women’s consciousness. As I have explored in chapter two, Oduyoye’s life was rooted in feminist expression for as long as she can remember. She was raised within what I want to name an expression of “Akan feminism.” She learned early on that women were not only allowed to question, but should rightly do so for the wellbeing of the entire community. Thus, her Akan feminism was an act of inclusion, as it dared to consider its women as part of the overall community and thus intrinsic to the determination of communal wellbeing, even if this reality had to move against culture in some ways.

74 Ibid, 121.

75 Ibid.
within Christian theology.\textsuperscript{76} The balance of community and the wholeness of personhood drive her determination for “the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human.”\textsuperscript{77}

The impartiality of human creation through the Supreme Being is thus important to keep in front of us. It is in realizing humanity’s locus in the order of the universe that a toxic theological anthropology can be a subverted and right understanding instantiated. Akan cosmology has precepts similar to that of Christian anthropology, and when considered closely and communally, universal and gender-inclusive values can be found at Akan Christianity’s root.

\textbf{Communing Humans: How We Need Each Other}

African women’s silence (and thus assumed docility) seems to be a common theme in their social and ecclesial significance.\textsuperscript{78} It is also the norm within incomplete forms of Christian theological anthropology. The voices of women to refute this viewpoint are, unfortunately, mute or completely absent. Sadly, women’s silence is often read into as an agential absence. The absence of women’s input and equal authority in how their image is constructed speaks to the voluminous effects of and efforts to bolster male imaging over and against that of the female within theological anthropology. Thus,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa} (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 121.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Cultural Bondswoman” from \textit{Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 82 & 86.
\end{itemize}
new imagination is critical. What is it within one’s imagination that positions women as beneath men? What funds the notion that women are only needed in ways determined and focused by men? A message of man’s “completeness” without consideration of the woman’s place in God’s announcement of goodness (and completeness), fails to acknowledge God’s creative intention and meaning.

A holistic understanding of female and male existence gives way to a holistic understanding of God. Once theological anthropology is positioned away from solely signaling human understanding of the self, and moves towards a more inclusive approach towards understanding God, can it rightly do revelatory and spiritual work? To understand humanity as needing each other as suggestive of the relational complexity of God is to be positioned rightly to recognize the divine imperative. Human beings were created by God’s choice and doing, not by their own power, will, or supposed volition.

A theological anthropology that centers God as the anchor of such theological imagining, presents a means of reverential imagination and revelatory potential. A standpoint that honors God as granting sight and insight is the position from which we must, and from which Oduyoye urges us to, begin our anthropological consideration.

A vision of the self and of others that emphasizes “justice, caring, sharing and compassion…is the expression of the divine image all human beings are expected to
reflect."79 God can be seen in the apertures of connectedness. If humanity strays away from this understanding of God by misreading relationality between each other, its God-likeness is distorted. It is an act of repression, of refusing “to allow other the chance to reveal the image” of God.80 To domesticate a woman’s expression of the self to that which man assigns to her is to domesticate God’s creative intention. It is to limit the potential of God’s desires, desires long existent before the emergence of men.81

Thus the reality of difference or distinction should not become the root of theological discrimination. Variety of human being must be affirmed, not limited – for God intended varied human existence, male and female. What has tainted our remembrance of such is a delimited hermeneutic interpreting variety as a precursor to scarcity; scarcity towards what is unclear. Oduyoye does not directly answer what the imagined problem of women is for those who operate under an androcentric theological anthropology.82 But she does inquire what it would mean for humanity to consider all of itself, female and male, when asking questions of its origins and its best expression. In

81 I am not asserting “men” as a catch-all term for “humanity,” but am literally referring to those socialized to operate as men. In this, I aim to make a point, to reinforce the ordering of divine-human existence as a whole, and deter from placing unnecessary emphases on male-female (or man-woman, if we consider the socialization of biology) ordering as a relevant point of distinction.
82 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Women in Folktales” from *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 39-40. The origin of the folktakes, Oduyoye argues, occurs when stories are “exchanged” by a man named, Ananse for that which God had requested, but also because of Ananse’s cruel treatment and sacrifice of the women he’s related to. Hence the shift of origin stories are Ananse-centered and not God-centered.
order to build a strong and more complete theological anthropology Oduyoye imagines a communal approach. She hopes to “build a human community whose obligations arise from within ourselves rather than from outside pressure.”83 These outside pressures, comprised of hermeneutical misconstructions, assert certain voices and intentions as superior to others, all the while ignoring the voice and intention of God.

What are we to make of a theological anthropology that not only diminishes women, but also marginalizes God away from God’s intents and possibilities? A theological anthropology that does not consider the fullness of its created beings signals a deviant epistemology that draws us no closer to a more complete understanding of the multiplicity of being. It instead muddies the essence of the complexly created existence each creature of God holds within itself.

**Remedying Humans: A Way Forward**

If African Christians have been operating under a faulty understanding of human being, the question becomes: what might a proper African Christian theological anthropology be? For Oduyoye it is one that includes, even requires, the full participation of both women and men. She calls for “an inclusive theological response to the spiritual needs of African Christians.”84

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Unfortunately, she argues, “in the present state of man/woman relationship, our culture-bound typologies condition not only the individual but also the whole community to believe that labels are decreed by God.”

The notion of tradition, though beneficial in many ways, has proved incomplete in this instance. It fails to realize the primacy of human relationality as determined by the divine, not male-centered interpretations of such. Male interpretations cannot be dominant voices; women must be considered fully part of or equal determinants of the shape and function of a community.

The dismissal of women from the creative point of theological revelation, especially from an African standpoint is no longer an option if African theology wants to hear and know its own fullness. To mishandle women’s voices in African theological expression is to forgo its African-ness. On a practical level, the inclusion of all within the African community yields the fullest expression of African voice and viewpoint.

Oduyoye’s insistence, then, is towards what undergirds Akan (and African) ways of life: an African-centeredness that makes space for Africa’s naming itself.

For the Akan, women must actively and consistently work to re-image and re-imagine themselves, to speak and assume themselves into the desires and expressions of

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86 Because if we’re honest, one can never silence a determined African woman’s voice 🎤
Akan communal life. In Oduoye’s view, many African women are not interested in aligning themselves with pre-constructed notions of human relationality that does not: first, center God’s actions in creating humanity equally; and second, include women equitably in the determination of what this communal life looks like. To align one’s self in this way is to assume male greater than God – ironically moving into more troubling waters than Mary Daly’s brazen contention that “If God is male then male is God.” A mentality favoring males is more akin to the statement, “Male is more than God.” Can males be beyond God the father? Oduoye asserts, no!

For Oduoye, the point is not about female or male pre-dominance. Like the image of newly weaved tapestry, she imagines mutual dependence and reciprocity between African men and women. The well-being of the collective and proper understanding of human-being is most indicative of a healthy cosmological viewpoint.

Under the divine, of greatest importance is right human relationality. The premise of Galatians 3:28 echoes in the background of Oduoye’s approach. Just as there is neither male nor female in Christ, for Oduoye, “…we can all say that neither the male nor the female is greater than the community, for the community transcends the joint existence and contribution of women and men who compose it.” The community is a living.

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88 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, c1973), 9.
breathing entity complete in its best expression of itself. But it will not be well if it marginalizes itself in order to build a fortress of relational imbalance for the benefit of some. Women cannot be socialized to inferior status but must be lifted up as equally important for the ultimate good of the entire community.91 And what might this good be? The voice of women must be heard in order to know the answer to this; they have been kept away from the opportunity to answer for too long. African women have insight into the renewal of theological thought towards communal wholeness.

Though women, in many ways, are speaking up for the right to have their voices matter equally alongside African men’s or alongside Western voices, when it comes to theological propositions, they are also cognizant of the need for their voices to stand on their own, for they hold knowledge that the Church, African and universal, need to hear. Women must be allowed the space to do theology as well as rely on the fact that God will clarify that which God’s people need to know. Women’s insight and voice can summon the community back to its divine origin.92 Oduyoye challenges that to hold back this fact of African theological expression is to sin against the Holy Spirit and to move against it’s movement.93 For Oduyoye, to delimit women is a serious spiritual offense, but to include women in the totality of African theological voice is to hold true

to the precepts of humanity’s intended createdness: wholeness and unity under the Supreme Being.

This unity in created-ness is demonstrated in the collective unity and functioning of the Christian church. Turning to Oduyoye’s ecclesiology, we recognize the benefit of a theological anthropology that extends proper and full recognition to all human beings, for we receive the vision of a holistic church as God intended.
Chapter Six | Who Do We Say We Are?: Ecclesiology as Witness to the Word

We must be careful as we work on tasks of self-definition.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

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Let's Have Church: Oduyoye’s Ecclesial Emphases

Mercy Oduyoye likens the communal nature of the Christian church to be similar to a familial unit. Its intention is to embody oneness in Christ under God.¹ This notion of wholeness seems hopeful – that different people would come together to exist as a single unit of God’s expression in the world. The expectation for the church was never “unitary structure” but the unanimity of diverse forms of being. The premise of the Christian church would be various modes of wholeness towards the same end: life together as demonstration of reverence towards God. This coexistence of unity and difference would be the precise means through which God’s influence would be announced in the world as for the world.² The church was intended to be a unit of distinctive members who shared the same sense of belonging and purpose, who understood life similarly, in many ways, and lived into this reality.

² Ibid.
The emphasis on family speaks to the mutual commitment found within such an assembly, of interdependence found within the church. The church embodies the collaboration of various peoples attentive to the will of God, guided by the life of Christ and driven by the urge of the Holy Spirit. But it is literally the embodiment of difference; the body of Christ is a complex organism of holy connection and intention. This is the place from which Oduyoye’s ecclesiology adds richness and complexity, for she asks: does the church know and honor the fullness of itself? In embodying difference, is the church a functional, healthy, embodiment of the will of God?

Oduyoye engages inquiries about the church’s fullest expression of itself from missional and cultural angles. She reveals the harm done within both as they overemphasize difference and thus a mode of individual pursuit, instead of the celebration of distinction and the goal of wellness for the African church and Christian church as a whole.

Oduyoye’s work on the mission of the Christian church, of its intention and purpose, is recognition work. It invokes visibility and thus response for and towards people. It turns people’s attention towards the circumstances churches are either blind to on purpose or by virtue of ignorance. The impetus of her ecclesial perspective is, thus, to bring the church into full view. At the moment, patriarchal control over the church’s

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3 Ibid, 466 & 471.
functioning and operation suggests that the church has an incomplete understanding of itself.

Oduyoye has proven herself by engaging with the Christian church on local and global scales. Her ecumenical work with the World Council of Churches, specifically through the Ecumenical Decade, as well as with the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, and the Circle of Concerned African Women, to name a few, harken serious reflection towards the inner workings of the church and the damage that it does on global and personal scales when unchecked. In her work within these organizations, Oduyoye illumines the problematic rationale behind the viewpoint of a church that does not see the extensiveness of its representation, a church that refuses to appropriately acknowledge all of its members. This church chooses fragmentation in its pursuit of power through separation and regulation. It is void of a vision of itself that promotes wholeness, and a wholeness that is well within its reach, especially if attentive to the voices of its women.

African women have often been on the wrong side of the church’s misrecognition. That women have to fight for the same visibility that all Africans had to wrestle from Europeans proves the vision of the church as a whole as biased and in need of hefty imaginative reformation. It also proves the vision of the church in Africa as flawed and acting contradictory to its own global campaign for visibility.
In this chapter I will examine how Oduyoye offers a vision for a holistic ecclesiology from an African woman’s theological perspective. She first identifies the problematic places within and perceptions purported by the Christian church at large and the African church; she offers an overview of the church’s inception in West Africa, identifying the problems of colonial history. She then moves to address places where the African church is foiling its own efficacy and mission as it relates to its conceptions of pluralism and the stagnation that gendered dynamics inflict upon its influence. She reveals that the intersections of women’s experience and their desire to change the systems that afflict them in tandem with just expressions of tradition and reason constitute the core of African women’s theology. African women, in this way, have tasked themselves to trouble the waters of the institution.\(^4\) They dare to assert the need for what Oduyoye calls, a “two-winged theology,” representative of women’s and men’s viewpoints.\(^5\)


Mission Statement: African Ecclesial Perspective on Christian Missions

The earliest Christian churches in Africa were thought to have existed since the fourth-century. But the Christian churches in Africa’s history which directly and greatly impacted Oduyoye’s personal development and growth started in the 18th century and manifested completely in the 19th century. She explores this in depth in her work, Hearing and Knowing from which I draw heavily to examine her views on the emergence and development of the church in particular African contexts and within the church universal.

This importation of Christianity was undergirded by a missionizing imperative attached to an economic incentive and aspiration. Oduyoye cites that after the Portuguese had already made contact and taken slaves and gold from West Africa, the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Mormons became...
interested and thus became involved in African missions. Historically, this venture would take root, but in unintended ways. Though Western Christianity would plant itself in West Africa, its dissemination methods, through European missionaries, were not fully accepted nor deemed acceptable. They were instead reflective of a foreign practice and culture, and a nocuous one at that.

Oduyoye deems the nature of the missionary efforts “an exercise in cultural occupation.” The intention was not only spreading of the Gospel as a religious and thus life-changing entity, but also the constant and altering presence of the missionaries themselves. The Christian message, then, was not a message to be divorced from the European culture that brought it. It could not stand alone, for it would be too prone, too vulnerable to African expressions of such. And such representation could not do. This Christianity, then, came as a supposed corrective to not only African religion, but also African culture. This was evidenced in controversial practices such as cultural reconfiguring African names to fit European tongue and pronunciation.

Though many African aligned with the culture that accompanied the religion, the approach overall was not fully met with welcome. It pressed upon a nerve in

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11 Ibid, 33.
12 Ibid.
13 I qualify my statement with “fully” in order to address the reality that for many Africans, Christianity was well received, so much so that it took on an assimilative quality. Some aligned with the belief that their traditional religious foundations were flawed and in need of saving. Oduyoye laments this turning against traditional faith culture. In her 1997 keynote plenary address “Troubled but Not Destroyed” at the All African Council of Churches meeting in Addis Abba, Ethiopia she argues the global economic, political
African consciousness, namely one that fought to assert that what Africans already practiced was sacred, rooted, and enough in itself to fulfill their sense of religious belonging.\textsuperscript{14} The importance of culture was still a prevalent factor in African reception of the faith.\textsuperscript{15}

Various entry points contributed to Africans’ acceptance of Christianity, namely the material advantages associated with the faith as well as religious similitude Africans perceived between both their own and the Christian religious tradition. It is also commonly known that some Africans accepted Christianity for the material benefits it could provide.\textsuperscript{16} Since African understandings of redemption and salvation are tied to physical and material wellness and being,\textsuperscript{17} this logic made sense on a level deeper than simply the accrual of wealth. The benefits of the faith, which included access to various and social consequences that blind religious assimilation in Africa has yielded. She passionately asks, “When did we learn so much hatred towards ourselves?” and additionally proclaims “We are alienated from our roots…” She asserts that both Christianity and Islam have “launched an assault on African religion in ways that undermine other aspects of traditional culture such as health care and statecraft and the understanding of community.” Oduyoye views these consequential positions against the traditional faith culture as problematic and as an assault on African ways of being and worldview. The threat is not in the addition of Christianity but in the invalidation of all of what was before the Christian faith took root in West Africa.


\textsuperscript{15} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa} (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 33-34.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 41. Oduyoye writes, “Western standards of living were paid for by the West, so Africa, puzzled and awed, accepted them as necessary to the religion.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 35.
resources such as hospitals and schools, served as a great incentive to bring Africans into the fold. One of Western Christianity’s main draws was the numerous benefits that could impact African communities.

Additionally, the missionizing effort was not entirely onerous as many Africans exercised religious opennessness as an extension of hospitality; they tolerated the missionary presence because of their customs of welcome.\(^\text{18}\) They were open to hearing more about the details of the faith because of this cultural practice, first, and personal interest, second. The points of connection with the Christian faith and African cosmology also captured their interests. The notion of diverse deities found traction within West African societies. This is how many African Christian churches started. In this religious alignment, African spirituality and traditional religious practices could blossom into African Christian churches.\(^\text{19}\) The values of Christianity would be merged with African ways of life. It was clear that Christianity would add to, and not replace, African faith tradition and cosmology.\(^\text{20}\) Oduyoye describes the phenomenon of this syncretic action as African Christianity being birthed from particular forms of hearing and understanding. The overall sentiment from Africans was a secure foundation in their

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 36.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 32-33. This is also seen in the new Christian names people acquired through baptism. Oduyoye notes, “African Christians became incorporated into the church and into Christ without giving up their incorporation into their human family.” Africans kept their name but now had to think through what both of their names meant in concert with each other, what they were naming about each person. This syncretic reality demonstrated one instance in which Africans theologized from their context.
religious location. Christianity would fit into their religious categories, thus, “I have heard” the gospel message was not the same as “I accept” the gospel as extended to Africans - at least in the ways Europeans hoped.\textsuperscript{21} Many Africans would have agency in how and where Christianity would guide and inform their pre-existent spiritual life. Christianity would be incorporated into African spirituality and made African operating with and within its same values, including honoring humanity.\textsuperscript{22}

The distinction between “I have heard” and “I accept” would prove to be an important theme in the West African context, specifically. In the early nineteenth-century Christianity introduced itself to West Africa more permanently. From it, Christianity entered African communities and worked its way into the religious life of African peoples aiming to be the soul faith tradition of all;\textsuperscript{23} but this was not (and currently is not) met without challenge.\textsuperscript{24} Historically, the establishment of the Christian church in Africa was met with both hesitation and eventual (and sometimes argued, superficial) acceptance.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church to Account,” \textit{The Ecumenical Review}, 10/1995, Volume 47, Issue 4, pp. 479-489, especially 479. Western Christian custom as foundation succeeded in some ways in its teaching African peoples to ascribe to a logic of Western dependence and affirmation in theological claims pushing against African self-assertion peoplehood, culture and history.
The missionary impetus revolved around bringing salvation to a continent that appeared to lack true spiritual guidance and wellness. It took on paternal positioning suggesting itself as the head figure in the “family” who knew best and had to manage the “growth” and maturation of the inferior African people. Often pitching African ways of life as barbaric and uncivilized, the missionaries pictured themselves to be a heroic force against idolatrous African religion. For European missionaries the overhaul of African culture in order to replace it with European culture was the objective. The missionaries placed great emphasis on proclamation of the evangelical message conjoined with a civilizing mission. African peoples were proclaimed to be economically inferior, uneducated, and in need of a civilizing salvation; European persons were positioned to be the salvific carriers of such a remedy. African peoples were approached with the idea of a complete life-conversion in mind. In the larger scheme of things, European missionary efforts wrongly assumed that the Christian faith and European culture that accompanied it would replace the religious culture embedded in

African life, because African life in itself was assumed inadequate and not to be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{30}

Oduyoye notes, however, the “…African was not an open book.”\textsuperscript{31} Many Africans clung tightly to their culture; it served as a guiding force within their ecclesial practice. What makes an African is their cultural rootedness; the thrust of the African church is in its cultural expression, thus, abandoning African culture for the reception of Christianity did not translate to several African peoples as the correct thing to do. Instead the Christian faith and African religious understanding would be merged together to best suit African people’s expression of faith. While Europeans imagined superseding, many Africans imagined a joining.

Missionaries approached West Africa as if Africans were demonized peoples awaiting the right word from God, but this was not so. Africans had never imagined their lives as deficient and in need of correction. Africans were not containers waiting to be filled with the Christian word. Africans already possessed rich and lively culture; they were agential beings curious about and tentatively open to the message of Christ that the missionaries put forth.\textsuperscript{32} Initially, Africans did not see themselves as the less powerful beings in the missionary encounter; they were intelligent persons who saw

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 41.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 36-37.
benefits to the Christian faith and thus took the risk to welcome and include it as a religious perspective amongst their other foundational religious beliefs.

The Christian church in West Africa is a product of the precepts of the Christian faith and the cultural values and staples of African culture. The African Christian church in its current syncretic iteration was formed under a desire to approach Christianity as something to join with existing ways of life and modes of thought. Oduyoye notes that some Africans converted because of the affinity the Christian faith had for the sacredness of life and for “the quality of life of the whole community.” This perceived belief easily aligned with African norms and values.

The Christianity that Africans were attracted to did not come from the European missionaries or their contexts; in fact, these missionaries actually confused the Christian message by their contradicting practices. The religious claim was not the issue, the

33 In her 1998 Keynote Address at the 50th Anniversary of the World Council of Churches 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, “From Cover to Core: A Letter to my Ancestors” Oduyoye offers an appeal to the ancestors to restore the core values of African religious culture to African Christian practice and expression.  
34 My use of “syncretism” suggests that Africans include elements of their culture to “create” their own Christian expression “making it theirs” so to speak. E. Bolaji Idowu would call this “enculturation” as it seems to signal the gradual acceptance of one culture into a previously existing one. They express similar sentiments for sure. In my opinion, the terminology of syncretism slightly edges that of enculturation because embedded within the swift acceptance of Christianity, for some, were direct links to African cultural practice. In other words, syncretism allows space for the immediacy of conversion as well as the points of difference within the religious expression. Though she utilizes “syncretism” to describe the religious shifts and re-workings, Oduyoye also considers enculturation as very much a part of the narrative of African Christianity (see Mercy Amba Oduyoye “Unity and Mission: the Emerging Ecumenical Vision,” The Ecumenical Review, 06/1987, Volume 39, Issue 3, pp. 336–345).  
makers of such claims were. The missionary’s demonstration of the Gospel did not align well with their own realities. In other words, Africans experienced confusion since the Christianity that the Europeans supposedly claimed did not seem to have taken much root within their own contexts. When the Queen of England for instance claimed Africans were “bloodthirsty” while England was “great and happy,” she did not account for the poverty, corruption and crime occurring in her own country. Further, Africans thought it unclear at best, and contradictory at worst, that both the Western slave owner and the missionary exercised the same faith. The alliance between the church and the institution of slavery was unsettling. The racist beliefs that undergirded the paternal actions of the missionaries and the contradicting foundation on which their message and way of life stood were looked upon with skepticism and caution.

Perhaps the greatest consequence of the Christian message was its emphasis on individual salvation. This challenged African conceptions of the community as a living force, instead asserting individual routes to salvation as determinant of one’s soul life. The cultural inner-workings of communal influence were ignored. African religious worship forms and cultural and familial norms were repudiated or ignored. The

38 Oduyoye describes this as mainly the result of the Portuguese’s missional efforts and heavy participation in the slave system. She argues that there was never care for Africans in their entirety, only “care” for their souls. The main procurement of their inferiority was in the Portuguese denouncing African religious positions and procuring African bodies for slave work justified by Christianity.
impetus for the African to convert to Christianity from the perspective of the missionary was cultural assimilation while for African recipients it was movement towards wellness. Grasping Christianity in their own way would be the means to lift up and pursue African cultural and religious precepts of salvation and liberation, health, and wholeness.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Hearth-holds and Holding God: Knowing God Variously}

The Christian church must attend to the idea of religious freedom in Africa. Home to many and a continent of multiple religious expressions, Africa can serve as an example of religious welcome and tolerance. Oduyoye shows us that God knows creation through a variety of religious avenues, including the Christian church.

Oduyoye intentionally employs and reconfigures the notion of “home” to name the multiplicity of God in various religious expressions and to offer a counterpoint to women’s marginalization within the home and social structures like it. She aims to give home new meaning and divine purpose, especially for those entrapped by the gendered affiliations and assumptions built around it. For Africans, especially for African women, the notion of home does not have to be one of rigidity, but of it can be a place of openness and possibility. The literal reference of the home can provide an illustrative and symbolic example of the place in which religious diversity can co-exist and live; it can serve as a place of broad welcome for all religious courses.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 44.
Coming from cultures that box their beings into restricted gendered roles, the idea of ruling structures weighs heavily on African women as they discern and aim to live out the true identity of the Christian church. Oduyoye, and women like her, assert that these stratifying attitudes have no place in Christian discourse. She claims instead that the Christian church to be akin to something like a “hearth-hold” of Christ in God, a deviation of the potentially oppressive (and symbolic) assertion of the household of God.\(^41\)\(^42\) Christianity is one hearth-hold of religious expression in which God is honored; many other hearth-holds exist and they do so on equal plain as the Christian faith. For women, this image of shared and equal identity under God connects most powerfully with them; it moves against the image of the house or home as the sole location of women’s worth but opens up the notion that women have say exactly where and as who they are and that in this, God is present. It insists that there is room for everyone to have equal weight and importance in the eyes of God.

Since the household, for many African women, is an image and reality typically imagined as replete with limitation, boundedness, and constraint, through hearth-hold imagery Oduyoye asserts a renewed understanding of the church’s relationship to the


\(^{42}\) Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Family as Symbol of Ecumenism,” *One in Christ*, 01/1989, Volume 25, Issue 3, p. 238, especially 467-469. The familial unit can also be considered through the culturally specific imagery of the “Abusua,” the clan within one’s people group. It expresses not only belonging to the people of God. Oduyoye names the Christian church as one “Abusua” and denominations as individual households within the “Abusua.”
Creator God. Positioning African women’s place in the theological order in this way suggests continuity with God as “Africans… are organized around the hearths of women, some of whom may be biological mothers…” Women gain not only recognition, but also divine importance.

Oduyoye is acclaiming the notion of syncretism while honoring women’s stories and their position in society and in the world. Thus, even further with this hearth-hold focus, God and God’s presence in the world are empowered to live into imagery that honors women’s being and work. Imagining African women’s affiliations with the hearth and the maternal suggests alignment with God as Mother, Christ as the Compassionate One, and the Spirit as Comforter. It suggests a familial character and tone to church make-up and ecclesial life, and one that honors the significance of everyone in the home. It insists on a level of mutuality. It requires that role-playing

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44 Ibid, 78.


46 The problem that arises within this structure concerns whether responsibility for care, for sustenance and for the wellness of all (of the community), is feminized or not. In this, it is made the primary responsible of females. Would this not further the trajectory of imbalance and assumptive role-playing for African women to be positioned in this Trinitarian paradigm. Are women, then expected to model and mirror, God, Christ and the Spirit in self-giving, selflessness, sacrifice and rectifying work for the whole of humanity (or even their particular community)? Is this parallel healthy for bringing about proper balance between the sexes?
cease and the entire church take up the mantle to “promote the growth of all into the fullness they see in Christ.”

Most importantly, it suggests that this is what the church should be indicating problems with the church as is. What Oduyoye purports is a vision for the Christian church utilizing imagery that African women, and African people as a whole can connect with and take hold of. The household can be reclaimed by African women to signal that the comfort and closeness of home can be aligned with the movement, presence, and expression of God’s self. In inverting the image of the home towards divine means instead of delimiting practice, Oduyoye’s theological innovation comes into full view. She re-conceptualizes the home and allows women to interpret it for theological means. She gives women the reins to re-define what certain spaces mean for them towards their own theological reflection. In this, African women serve as theologians in their own right blending insight and wisdom with African cultural values. They syncretize spaces and places of their oppression with the potential of the divine within it; in this they gain power to name what is good and true about God’s presence in ordinary life. In African women asserting a hearth-hold of Christ, they are asserting their theological voices as cognizant of God’s movement within African culture.

Embedded within this is the goal of the recognition of the entire community as belonging to God. African women’s theological reconfigurations still put the people as a collective at the forefront of theological reflection: how might God be honored and fully known, all the while holding the customs of the Akan or the Yoruba or any other tribal and people group in the forefront of our theological imaginations? Oduyoye asserts a community-centered theo-logic in her consideration of the body of Christ amidst who others are under God. She actively theologizes African communal importance placing it front and center of her religious reasoning.

However, it is critical to re-iterate that Oduyoye does not limit her consideration of God’s creation to Christians alone. The body of Christ is only one hearth-hold within the household of God; the household is extensive. According to African religious precept, all human beings, all hearth-holds, all communities, belong to God. The Christian church, then, is one hearth-hold within the larger household of God. Claiming all within the household of God to be Christian is a false assumption.48 God holds all of God’s creation, whether they are part of the hearth-hold of Christ or not.49 African women believe in the expansiveness of God in this way. God is big enough to hold those in Christ as well as those who utilize other means to draw nearer to God. In this pluralistic move, Oduyoye asserts a standpoint that recognizes not only the

expansiveness and reach of God, but affirms religious traditions outside of Christianity as critical means through which God can be known. She reverses the colonial logic that works to demonize particular religious traditions outside of the traditional Christianity while simultaneously making a theological point about the omnipotence of God. She claims that our means of knowing and accessing God can vary because of the extent of God’s presence in the world. She loyally keeps her context in the forefront of her theological and thus ecclesiological imagination.

It is in fact possible to do theology while centering Africans and their context as critical and important to such discerning work. Since “the whole cosmos constitutes the oikonomia of God,” African women recognize the Christian church as one means of honoring God.\(^5^0\) While Oduyoye recognizes her viewpoint as Christian, she also recognizes that one’s lens does not negate the force or reality of another’s. African women’s ecclesiology then resists doing any sort of religious erasure of views that differ from their own stance, but rather advocates for the full consideration and respect towards other religious means to access God. In this, African women’s ecclesiology refuses the colonial trappings and narrowness of dismissing religious forms different from their own.

For African women within the Christian church their focus is on concertizing their being (considered) church as well. This fits best into the historical trajectory of the

early Christian church up to the modern church, examining who could be included in such a body. African women assert that throughout this history the treatment and place of women and the least of these should be designated most important, because the evolution of the church’s expression is part of African women’s historical Christian legacy, too. African women make the most immediate connections between the original intentions of the church and their current experiences within it as deeply intertwined.51 The overarching wellness of the church, which must include women’s wellness, is of the utmost concern for African women.

Oduyoye seeks to call out how, for African women, the practices of the Christian church at large are most reflective of a kind of suppressive cultural logic. The church boasts itself as an entity “in the world but not of the world,” but fails to demonstrate how it functions differently than the rest of the world as it relates to women.52 Ironically many within the Christian church falsely denote justice and freedom, particularly and mainly when sought out by women, to be expressions of worldliness. This reasoning invokes not only an invalid sense of separation from the world, but also one of superiority in its re-instantiation of oppressive practice. For the women naming the church’s neglect and silencing practices, this double standard proves a harmful rationale imprinted in a logic of dominance, often for the benefit of men. Musimbi Kanyoro’s work on cultural hermeneutics reveals that this logic of practice within the Christian

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid, 82.
church is nothing more than a reflection of cultural norms. The church, Oduyoye argues through Kanyoro, is nothing more than a “microcosm of their [African women’s] status within society of which the Church is a part.”53 The Church is not a cultural determinant as much as it is perceived to be, rather it is an indication of the power of culture’s effects within African contexts. Culture rules the day; the church is merely an entity that functions in alignment and in response to such foundations. For Oduyoye taking this rationale seriously helps identify the problems embedded within ecclesial life for African women. The combination of strict adherence to the interpretation of Hebrew scripture and the delimiting positions of African traditional religious practice work in concert to create a cistern of inferiority for many women.54 The culture is the culprit. If the church, the entity that is supposed to serve as a source of communal freedom, merely falls in line with practices that do not offer African women equal benefits to their male counterparts, it fails to be the carrier of good news. Given this, for African women, what power does the Gospel have? Is the Gospel for African women? Where and how are Christ-likeness present if women must fight and claw to be seen and heard?55

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53 Ibid. It is important to note the reverential labeling Oduyoye places on the Christian church. To capitalize the “C” in church suggests a direct affiliation with the Christ, in such a way that it holds spiritual weight and authority of a sort that exceeds any typical ideational category of spiritual communal gathering.


55 Ibid, 481 & 483.
**Calling for an Anti-Patriarchal Church**

For many African women the Christian church houses their cultural and spiritual death. The place that is supposed to hold safety, redemption, and resurrection is that which ensures repression, depravity, and a dead-ness inherent to its dealings with women. But the church limiting its women only limits itself. Is redemption and healing possible in places of constant wounding? What good can come out of an institution that continues its crusade of self-harm against and within itself? I answer this utilizing Oduyoye’s gender-inclusive approach: to include women in the church is to ask the church about its fitness while assuming women agents of its health, growth, and thriving. It is to recognize and name the truth that the church has always existed within women. This, then, begs other questions: Is the church killing itself when it makes its women invisible? Is the Christian church dismantling its own power by virtue of its shortsightedness and cultural stubbornness? Women make up a large percentage of the Christian church globally. What does it mean for one to beg to be included in that which one already comprises the majority? What misgivings about being and representation are embedded in an ecclesial logic that dismisses women’s prominent presence?

Women’s constant presence yet consistent neglect within the Christian church signals a crisis of theological imagination. It evokes a sense of an incomplete theological anthropology and theological standpoint as a whole; a complete theological communal envisioning would include women’s full participation and inclusion in the life and
movement of the church and its expression in the world. To do church other than this inclusive way demonstrates a failure not only to do, but also be, the church.

A cultural hermeneutic that positions itself differently is one exclusively belonging to and privileging, men. Oduyoye counts this perspective as one-sided, a thought position that unfortunately some women adopt inflicting harm on themselves and others like them.\(^56\) This is not the means to either a healthy or whole vision of the hearth-hold of Christ. In fact, for Oduyoye to hold a position that does not honor the fullness of creation in male and female expression is one resistant to what Christ represents. The Christian church fully cognizant of and fully honoring its members is what Christ would recognize as belonging to himself.\(^57\)

For Oduyoye, the Christian church must be able to critique itself. Her work illumines the voice, stories, and experience of women, a group invisibilized and reduced because of their biological make-up. She advocates for a theo-logic that necessitates the full inclusion of women in order for the church to realize its whole self.\(^58\) Oduyoye’s perspective and African women’s theology as a whole advocates for life in its fullness. Life should never be a struggle for visibility. She believes that liberation should never be an achievement, but a constant and consistent state of being. In Christ, life and liberation

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
should not be rarities; they should be the life-blood by which Christian discipleship exists. For African women, life and liberation are something stolen from them under patriarchal culture and its theological counterpart. It must be taken back.\textsuperscript{59}

African Christianity does not deviate too far from the African cultural frameworks from which it came. Patriarchy’s overturning, then, is cause for cultural re-framing. Once disrupted, the patriarchal foundation on which some African cultures rest, must reconsider its inner workings, its own life. This foundation, or patriarchal calm as Oduyoye calls it, is at best, volcanic in nature.\textsuperscript{60} It is dormant and normalized until it explodes from the inside out destroying the old in its path yet simultaneously creating the fertile ground for equality, justice, and communal sharing.\textsuperscript{61} African women do not want to have their life-purpose assigned to them, but want to be jointly involved in the definition of what life means for themselves and for the church as a whole.

The place from which Third-World women do theology, as a whole, is marked by injurious social systems. While many in the Third World place focus on the invisibilization of peoples on a global scale, Oduyoye names the parallels of Third-World treatment to gendered treatments from within certain cultures. If colonialism has taught Africans that they are overlooked and ignored, the irony must be explored that, in the same breath, African women are culturally treated as imperceptible. African

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\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
women’s oppression is intra-cultural. They are caught in the crosshairs of multiples sites of oppression, of destruction and harm - from military, to economic, to racial injustices.\textsuperscript{62} Oduyoye argues, “This politico-economic machinery of death, with its militarism, arbitrary arrests and so-called popular democracy, also promotes the abuse of women.”\textsuperscript{63} Women’s inferiority is a byproduct of cultural norms that structurally benefit men. Oduyoye’s work identifies that the domestic and the cultural structures exist in seam, “The structural violence against women is only matched by the familial one.”\textsuperscript{64} The means of oppression through Christian means already had a home-base in African cultural practices.\textsuperscript{65}

In keeping with the tradition of African anthropology, Oduyoye has dedicated her life to considering the complexity of theological concepts, language, and practice keeping in the forefront the cultural nuances of Africa and the dangerous practices placed upon and working inside of it. In Daughters of Anowa she suggests that Christian practice void of complete communal perspective lacks theological groundedness and foundation. Thus, to explicate how Oduyoye addresses the complexity found with African Christian practice, it is important to note the framework of African cultural and

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church to Account,” The Ecumenical Review, 10/1995, Volume 47, Issue 4, pp. 479-489, especially 484. Oduyoye argues, “The pyramids of power that exist in African culture have found companions in Christianity.”
sociological understandings of relationality as the groundwork on which its Christian
theology and ecclesiology is, or at least should be, established. Her attention to the
issues women face in a broken understanding of African relationality emerges from her
own story in the theological and scholastic world.

**Women’s Place in the Christian Church**

In order to know the state of the Christian church, ask an African woman. She
will be the one to signal its internal health as her experience offers honest report. As
those on the underside of ecclesial practice and recognition African women must be
heard to understand the church’s impact. They are the indicator of the efficacy of the
Christian church. Oduyoye’s ecclesiology insists on the full inclusion of women. It does
not consider the Christian church complete if it ignores any of its voices, and from her
standpoint, the voices of African women contribute greatly to the life of the church
universal, not only the church in Africa, alone. The potential of the church is only known
when it learns how to listen to itself, how to listen in on itself, and to correct its own
shortcomings and places of neglect.

Typically, a biblically-focused approach to doing and being church does not
yield benefit for the entire church but shows preferential treatment for those on its
upside, particularly men. It serves to reinforce the problematic cultural traditions
already in practice. It “absolutizes” gendered pronouncements curated within cultural contexts that hold a biased biblical hermeneutical lens and does not carefully consider the fluidity of the translation. What is needed is a biblical perspective of the church, one free from enslavement under outdated hermeneutical perspective. There is a unique opportunity within Christian scripture for Africans to connect its precepts with the best of their own culture; this could assert and celebrate the humanity of all beings as created by God. The impetus of Christian scripture should not be the legitimation of male humanness over that of women, but the interconnectedness of all creation. Scripture reminds the African church that it belongs to God, not to calcified cultural norms that refute the truth that God created humanity in totality out of love. The church should be and represent this love in the world.

Oduyoye tells a story of how when she was in the Methodist girls school in Mmofraturo, she and her classmates felt empowered to make scripture their own. Since the proverbs from the Bible were so close to Akan proverbs, the girls would recite Akan proverbs in place of the Proverbs of the Old Testament. The sentiment behind these

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66 Ibid, 480.
67 Ibid.
proverbs already lived deeply in Akan culture; it already expressed their way of life. Oduyoye’s story proves that she and her classmates could already hear themselves in the lessons of scripture. Moments like these are ones of recognition; it invites the wisdom of scripture to dialogue with African culture instead of supersede it. To Oduyoye’s dismay, this opportunity is lost on many Africans, especially concerning gender matters. Too many blindly follow “what the Bible says about women” in order to assert cultural machinations of order and control masquerading as Christian practice.72

The irony about the Bible’s absolute nature in African contexts rests in the fact that many Africans cannot read the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek.73 They instead rely on interpretations offered up in concert with pre-existing (and often patriarchal) cultural norms modeled from the West. Though word is proved as instructional to human action and belief, if not understood rightly, it extends opportunity for misinterpretation and abuse. Instead of focusing on the church as “gift of the word of God,” the words of scripture function as a barrier to its true purpose.74

Oduyoye calls for biblical solidarity, not necessarily towards identical reading of scripture, but towards interpretation that acknowledges the condition of all of humanity. She argues that biblical solidarity occurs “when people act with God to end oppression

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
and to build new communities of freedom in partnership with God."\textsuperscript{75} Biblical solidarity has less to do with biblical inerrancy and more to do with the content and heart of scripture holding meaning in the actions of those who express God’s love on the earth.

Solidarity is a prevalent theme in Oduyoye’s assertion of African women’s equality in the church. The partnership aspect of it can be thrown off kilter if not approached well. For example, though some consider the notion of complementarianism progressive it still adheres to an androcentric rationale.\textsuperscript{76} Within it, Oduyoye says, men still occupy positions of power: the man can continue to exercise full autonomy doing what he wants to do while the woman comes in after he already asserts his position and must adjust herself to “complete” that which has been left void, left over for her to fulfill. She holds no agency, but occupies a designated space.

The issue is one of participation. It seems that relationality is, unfortunately, pre-determined for women.\textsuperscript{77} Oduyoye keeps pointing back to the same problem, re-asserting the sad reality that through scriptural misreading and a distorted cultural hermeneutical lens, women are not granted full participation within the Christian church. They are not granted the same worth as men. Men, though created the same way as women – by the Creator - wrongly delineate women’s humanity. Through


\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 484.
interpretative liberty and sways of power, men gained determinative power to name women’s roles and abilities not only within the church, but also within general social and cultural places. This mentality supports the falsity that God moves primarily through men. Oduyoye and others like her actively seek to overturn this myth and the myth-making culture that sustains it. She aims to establish a theologically accurate understanding of God’s intention for the world, but in order for this to happen, men must be open recognizing the error and the injury they cause.

For Oduyoye, the notion of solidarity is critical in order to engage in honest conversations about the Christian church as the full inclusion and equal participation of women is non-existent in too many ecclesial contexts. The issues of separation have invaded the Christian imagination and stabilized itself so well that, for African women - the majority of many within these churches - the main issue of justice that plagues many African churches is the gender issue (not social justice, though still present and needing to be addressed in tangible ways). Ironically, the problems of equal and full representation and agency afflicts an institution founded on the full inclusion of all of humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. The existence of such a dilemma should be hard to explain. How does one respond to the absurdity of such a reality? How does the church transcend this issue of relational misconduct? Can the structures of creaturely relationality be righted?
For Africans, women in particular, turning to the work and example of Jesus Christ can be a helpful response, but Christology, too, must escape the trappings of patriarchal influence that seek to exert itself over the message of the Gospel and purpose of the church. A triumphalist Christology and subsequent ecclesiology is a thought pattern African women do not take kindly to. Domination in any form does not sit well with what Oduyoye and African women equate the Christian church to and what it stands for. To promote a brand of Christological domination, and subsequently, submission is to insist that the Church live by dividing itself. Sadly, for many African women, they are treated more humanely outside of the church than within it. In many instances, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has served as a repressive tool rather than a liberating one.\textsuperscript{78} Oduyoye reminds us that the Gospel should hold within it the claim of good news, hope, and communion for all.\textsuperscript{79} Christ should serve as the mirror through which the church sees the reality (and potential) of its humanity.\textsuperscript{80} Sexism within the

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In “A Biblical Perspective on the Church” Oduyoye makes a powerful claim that the “Christ-event is one that opens the church to all the vulnerabilities of inclusiveness.” While this can be mis-read as her centering and potentially equating maleness to “church,” it would be surface to scrutinize this transparent moment of naming reality. A closer reading would yield this statement as speaking to women in the church to still be church despite the messiness of seeking their full recognition. Men are the ones having trouble with women’s inclusiveness, thus the vulnerability is theirs to wrestle with, to hold, and to bring in conversation with the experiences of women. The reality in humanity rests in the insecure and misguided
church does not give the Gospel room to proclaim itself. It proves quite a difficult task to proclaim the Good News of Christ while one still lives within the confines of restrictive gendered relationality.

Oduyoye is calling for the church to step away from hostile universalizing claims, since the universal is often a tool to ignore specificity and particularity. Oduyoye inverts the universal in her claiming the particular as most indicative of a holistic ecclesiology. Context, in its smallest forms, matters. Her ecclesial standpoint deals in the specifics, cultural and gendered. She theologizes from a corrective place in order for the church to understand that its full potential is yet to be reached. The church, thus, cannot make claims about or for the world until its lays claim on its own shortcomings and actively works to remedy them. She turns the church’s mission back onto itself courageously asking it to examine itself closely.

An overhaul of a fragmented hermeneutic of relationality must be the primary concern of the Christian church. The inconsistency between the relational intention and its modern manifestation is symptomatic of humanity’s broken relationship with God. The gender concerns illumine a much larger theological issue that, if ignored, can distract from the matter at hand. The relational divisions present within the African church, manifesting strongest through gender discrimination, speaks to the mis-

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practices of the powerful over the powerless, when the emphasis should instead be on the church as a collective.
construal of the reality of human life as a phenomenon of interdependence. For Oduyoye and many African women, women and men need each other for human being to fully be, for the Christian church to truly be. To be a created being is to “be” together, in tandem, and in conjunction with the guidance of God’s movement and intention. God’s life-giving presence is felt and known best in a church living into its communal purpose.81

**Being African, Being Church**

Throughout her life’s work, Oduyoye speaks simultaneously to the Christian church at large and the African church in particular. She does this intentionally. She wants to honor the specificity of African expression of Christian community and gathering, but she also attends to the conceptions of Africans within the larger ecclesial body. In this, she illumines how women occupy doubly and triply marginalized spaces. As Africans, they are not always considered first or taken seriously within Christian practice and thought. As women, they are not always seen and honored as important because they are God’s creation; their status as critical to communal uplift does not bar them from being socially and culturally controlled. African women experience invisibilization on multiple fronts, from various manifestations of the Christian church. Oduyoye reasons that the labels of African, woman, and Christian disciple are identity

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markers that can and must be held together. Her pursuit of a just ecumenism comes from “below,”82 from those positioned beneath the feet of men who claim the well-being of the church most imperative. African women are critical to naming what the future of the African church and the church at large can be.

To ask about the future of the church in Africa is to not only inquire about its relation within itself, but also its relation to the rest of the world. The African church is anchored culturally, socially, and economically in African identity, though impacted greatly by Western missions. Missionary efforts built reliance on Western nations into African ways of life. Unfortunately this reality paired with the extraction of resources once European presence (and control) faded from the continent presents a severe problem of access to resources for the continuation of ministry and ecclesial presence in African contexts.83 What brings further anguish into the debate around the future of the church in Africa concerns the Western notion of status introduced through Christianity. Social status granted by the powerful forces of the Christian church (namely, Western recognition) creates hierarchy and shatters the African communal conception of wellness of the entire people. The resources of Christianity position the faith to be utilized as a

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82 Ibid.
bargaining tool, a means of claiming superiority and asserting power over others and creating division and new modes of relationality where there should not be.84

African precepts emphasizing the importance of community must not be made to represent inferiority, but must be repositioned as a sign of strong values. Dismissing principles and practices that are inherently African is active disrespect towards African humanity. Africans must have space not only to define their practices of value within the Christian context, but also to define the details of their human existence. Most Africans, women and men, would agree with this sentiment.

Thus the fact that Oduyoye’s life’s work is focused on applying this same logic to the gendered dynamics within African thought and within their respective ecclesial spaces, must be noted.85 The irony is palpable.86 To be the church in truth is to rid the church of practices and mentalities that belittle and delimit its members, especially its women. Oduyoye reminds us that “Partnership of women and men, ordained or not, is the true image of the Church of Christ.”87 The hearth-hold of God in Christ is the picture of what Christianity’s manifestation in the world should look like – an image of

84 Ibid, 496 & 500.
86 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 145. If, as Oduyoye argues, “all our human organizations are convicted by the standards of the trinitarian community,” then relational mutuality should not only be common practice but the grounds on which human life and community is made actual. The fight for women’s inclusion within the Christian church suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of Trinitarian function.
community that acknowledges the wealth of community in its entire make-up. It assumes women invaluable to the body of Christ and its impact within society. Unfortunately, even today, African women experience “double and trouble jeopardy,” to invoke black feminist Frances Beale, “because of racism, sexism and classism in all parts of the world.”

Oduyoye strongly believes that the Christian church should be one in solidarity with women. In her seminal work, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away*, she bluntly and prophetically asks, “what does sexism have to do with what we consider churches to be?” If the experiences of women are “part and parcel of the church’s experiences,” then men within the church should have no problem extending equal recognition to its women. Though addressed to the World Council of Churches in its internal and structural dealings with women, Oduyoye’s questions and assertions in this document prove relevant for ecclesial reflection as a whole. She boldly calls the church’s complacency and role in allowing the perpetuation of sexist practice within its spaces a hindrance to meeting Christ. Like Mary’s asking, “Who will roll the stone away?” before going to anoint Jesus, women in churches are asking who will roll away the obstacles that hinder women’s meeting Christ? Men’s interpretations and claims to power stand

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90 Ibid, 5.
in the way. Who will move them? For Oduyoye, the church must boldly say, “We will roll the stone away.”\(^{91}\) The men within the church, along with the women asking for joint efforts towards justice, must move themselves, move their peers, move their androcentric objectives out of the way. Many men must move themselves. The solution is in communal solidarity towards the full inclusion of the women of the Christian church.\(^{92}\)

It is clear that women must be valued partners in determining the future of the church, but what does this look like? How does this manifest? It is in allowing women full inclusion and thus full consideration within the matters that shape and influence church life. It is the motion “to ask for identification with the hopes and fears women live by and with, in church and society.”\(^{93}\) It means creating “a network of mutual support.”\(^{94}\) The whole body of the church, not only the women, must be involved in its fulfillment. It implies a sharing of power that has been wrongly cast as belonging to one group over another. If this mentality is not welcome in colonial encounter it must not be able to manifest in gendered instances within the Christian church.

\(^{91}\) Ibid, 14.


\(^{94}\) Ibid, 8.
Oduyoye encourages women to “unveil their true womanhood, to reinvent themselves, to piece themselves together from the bits of humanity various cultures and religions have left for them,” to, “reproduce women’s own images of true humanity.”

She urges women to define themselves, for in this they can have the power of their total humanity. Anything outside of the equal recognition of women and men as God’s creation, and thus equitable persons within the church, replicates sin. It suggests, a biased and incomplete understanding of humanity. It “has reduced stewardship to domination, husbanding to control, and complementarity to the paternal determining the scope of being for the maternal.”

According to Oduyoye, patriarchy distorts and destroys partnership.

The church should be demonstrative of the faith work of its people – it should witness Christ. Oduyoye is clear with her hope for the future of the African church: “The vision I have of the church is quite simply this: It should be a community that demonstrates to Africa how variety and diversity may become a blessing.” It should bring a rightly lensed African cultural precept and practice to the forefront, with emphasis on loving and caring for the entire community, to “enhance them with the

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95 Ibid, 52.
96 Ibid, 53.
good news and Jesus Christ.” The objective and intention of bringing the proper lens to Christian precept is for communal development and thriving. It means focusing attention on future hope and ambition while also tackling the current issues facing the African church as well as those facing African peoples as a whole. An antiquated understanding of human relations must be abandoned for the vision God set forth through and in creating humanity. The revelation of Christ in the world is not one of platitudes but tangible action and change. It does not solely bemoan but addresses the crises facing Africa as a whole. For Oduyoye the mission of the church “is to have good news for this motley crowd of humanity that pursues fullness of life without attaining it.” In the right and equal treatment of women and men, the essence of the Gospel will be received as an agent of healing.

**African Christian Ecclesiality and Faith Recognition**

The hearth-hold of God includes many faith traditions; the Christian church is one of them. African women’s ecclesiology recognizes this reality. The Christian church should be a communal space where the needs of people are met in concert with the presence and movement of God in Christ. The church requires a theological

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99 Ibid, 498.
100 Ibid, 499.
101 Ibid, 500.
102 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christianity and African Culture,” *International Review of Mission*, 01/1995, Volume 84, Issue 332-33, p. 77. This reality Oduyoye names as an issue for some Africans. They hold to the sentiment that Christianity can transform Africans, but Africans cannot inform Christianity – opposite of Oduyoye’s positioning. She holds a firm belief that syncretism can open up Christianity’s vision and scope. The point is not a transformation of Christianity, but a more complete unveiling of its expression and
foundation that expresses all of creation as belonging to God, but also “Jesus Christ as the Wisdom and Word of creation.” Both are not mutually exclusive. The emphasis of the church should be on remembering the whole world as sacred. African women believe that both the notion of knowing the Creator and of knowing God’s creation in its entirety as good and sacred is important to Christianity’s expression of itself.

The Christian church must be a faith practice accessible and available to all peoples. “In Africa,” Oduyoye contends, “mission and dialogue with people of other faith communities must converge.” Within its origins, Oduyoye notes, the church lays claims on humanity as a whole. Both women and men are its focus; it calls forth disciples to live into a new form of freedom void of the structures that resisted God’s desire for God’s creation. This focus on the collective connects to African cultural values.

range. She asks, “does Africa have religious concepts, modes, worship, spirituality and ethics that can help shape a Christianity that is of lively consequence to Africans?” She asks how Africans including their entire selves in this religious expression might move the faith tradition for the better, towards it own fullness. Oduyoye is essentially asking the question of Christianity that she asks concerning gender discrimination: does it know itself if it does not know this side of itself? She is asking is the Christian imagination one based in the West and Western understandings of the religious, or does its expression reach further and manifest in various ways (while still remaining itself)?


Oduyoye makes the intentional move of moving away from a theology too reliant on a God of the Old Testament (the God of the exodus) as a guiding force of Christian devotion as this God is affiliated with painful acts upon peoples in the name of claim over the Hebrew peoples. This reality moves African Christians to take a Christological focus.

104 Ibid, 501.

The communal life of various religious movements must be important for African Christianity. The multidimensionality of African religious experiences, experiences that belong to Africans must be in the forefront of Christian theological consideration. The whole of the African community is the focus of African Christianity; to proclaim God’s goodness to all is imperative, whether expressed through the way of Christ or done so differently. This may seem a controversial stance to take for some, but for Oduyoye this pluralistic approach to seeing the entire community and the world as important, is critical to the claims Christianity makes about itself and its promotion of love, life, and wellness. Womanist scholars Marsha Snelligan Haney, Tumani Mutasa Nyajeka, and Rosetta E. Ross, remind us that “Oduyoye speaks boldly, calling for the African church and mosque to lead in creating

107 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Family as Symbol of Ecumenism,” One in Christ, 01/1989, Volume 25, Issue 3, p. 238, especially 471 & 474. Oduyoye’s conception of Christian has a syncretic arc to it, but still holds fast to Christian identity as distinctly tied directly to Jesus Christ. On the one hand, she says, “In the Family [of God] members live and spread the ‘good news’ embodied in their chosen religion.” On the other hand, she insists, “The church is home to those who accept Christ. Accepting Christ has become the criteria for belonging because the coming of Christ is the critical event that created the Christian family.” She states again, “As a family, the church is concerned with the spirituality, traditions and preoccupations and predicaments of all who name themselves by Christ,” and “The family of Christ whenever it is encountered might be accorded its proper name - the church.” This assumes a specifically Christian understanding of church.

Unless Odunayo is purposely moving through both territories of open inclusion and specificity, her syncretic move can appear confusingly broad and specific at the same time. A position that holds two seemingly opposing viewpoints muddies the narration of what the church is definitively – does it adhere to language of children of God and open itself up to differing religious positions, or assert itself as an extension of Christ? Assuming the terminology of “church” she refers to is a Christian entity, full inclusion of those exercising a different faith entirely does not appear to fit – unless she is purposely asserting a new hybrid religious logic where a Christ-specific unit can also be religiously complex. In asserting both Odunayo may very well be expanding or challenging the possibilities of Christian understanding.
and implementing a mission and ministry that will engage and work together with the peoples of God who are seeking deliverance.”¹⁰⁸

To claim identity as the Christian church, and yet resist these fundamental and foundational truths is to give voice to a religious movement different from God’s intention.¹⁰⁹ A Christian vision of global care can attend to the social realities that affect all Africans; it can recognize the strength and widespread nature of oppression and instantiate justice on a global scale. Is this not the mission of the church, to see everyone and everything and to respond in kind?¹¹⁰

To exclude others in the name of love for them runs counter the fundamental message of the Christian Gospel: “The African church of the future will need to articulate a theology of religions for a multi-religious Africa and a new Christian anthropology that honors the variety of human types, cultures, ages, and genders.”¹¹¹ Oduyoye calls the church to exist outside of itself alone, outside of narrow conceptions of God’s agents and agency. She stresses that “theological plurality must remain

grounded in basic unity.” God can move through anyone, thus, God should be expressed through hopeful means, not repressive ones. The Christian church cannot ignore the presence of other religious forms as religious hierarchy does not prove helpful for the mission of the church. Oduyoye is calling the church into account. She is pushing it beyond itself, or at least beyond the hermeneutical limitations that have been placed on its efficacy (and which have functioned in areas such as racism, sexism, and classism). Her theological analysis and challenge prove that the Christian church does not understand or know itself or creation well if it does not hear from all of its members. Most harmed by its own community, African women can speak to the need for wider consideration of those who are othered and peripherized by Christianity. They know all too well the negative effects of exclusion and of forced invisibility. They know the contours of culture that keep some out while allowing others in. Women “both in church and in society, are challenging their marginalization because it visibly disrupts the unity of community.” If Africans take their cultural notion of the communal seriously, and even sacredly, women and other marginalized, forgotten, or ignored communities in Africa must be acknowledged.

For Oduyoye and for African women “[j]ustice, participation, and ministry…generate discussion of the Church’s self-understanding…” The crux of Christian identity should rest on the precepts Jesus embodied and that his disciples were charged to embody. The emphasis of the church should be on those who are not well, who are struggling, overwhelmed by the poverty of their situations and contexts. To spend energy on exclusion is to misuse the church’s healing potential. To direct attention and energy elsewhere is to misguide the intention and purpose of the church.

African women’s ecclesiology advocates for proper ecclesial practice as a demonstration of sound theology as “We human beings, with all created things, participate in the life whose source is the One God.” Oduyoye asks the church to claim itself as a particular and sacred entity able to demonstrate itself as faithful to the vision from which it emerged. This means that in order for the church to practice itself well, it must name and demonstrate itself to be the representation and presence of Christ in the world. The church must know what its women are saying, what the world sounds like, and what it needs. To identify the fullness of God’s reach the church must know the details of itself, including but not limited to its make-up.

In Oduyoye asserting that the Christian church see itself in seeing another we better understand the development and importance of women’s viewpoint within the overarching message of the Gospel. Women holding their own voices, and not that of the androcentric cultural values passed on and down to them, constitutes a rich and complex theological viewpoint open to the movement and power of God. Oduyoye calls for a community of interpretation forgoing old and oppressive structures of governance and regulation for a practice of cooperation.\textsuperscript{118}The objective is a holistic approach to theological hermeneutics.

The communal shift toward right and just ecclesial perspective is key for Oduyoye. Her viewpoint does not create nor necessitate a separation of African women’s experience from the church’s reality – to read African women’s narrations of their experiences as distinct from the core realities of Christian ecclesial identity would be a mistake. This view forgoes the intersectionality present in the body of Christ. Oduyoye cements into our imagination that the experiences of African women are the experiences of the Christian church; women and church are not separate entities. The flesh of the church is dense with the stories of African women just as much as any other people group. The aura of the Christian church is both female and male.

Thus the calls for justice, participation, and ministry that African women are calling forth for themselves are not merely vested points of interest; \textit{they} are the crux of a

holistic Christian ecclesiality. These called-forth truths are the full revelation of the church. If the church does not embody these realities for all of itself, especially its women (and I would add other minoritized voices within it), it fails to fulfill itself. It fails to be itself; it succeeds instead of becoming that which it was never ordained to be in the first place.

**African Women’s Ecclesiology**

Oduyoye, in calling for the equality of women and men in the church, is calling the church back to itself. *Koinonia*, or the sharing of common life is the original intention of the Christian church; what it must be attentive to in order to live into its name (in this form) is its composition. Oduyoye’s work asks: who are positioned as “church” and who are positioned as the shoulders, backs, and wombs that the church “must” stand on in order to procure its greatness? Can the church be great if it does not know or value its entire self? And further, does the church know itself? Oduyoye’s work prophetically interrogates the limited imagination of some within the Christian church illuminining how it in fact does not recognize itself. The church, Oduyoye purports, must re-learn not only what it was intended to be in the world, but also what it looks like. The church must be troubled by “…its own self-inflicted divisions, by the multiplication of division, by the failure to recognize the Church in the ‘other,’ by internal divides between clergy and lay,
women and men, adults and minors, Black and White, rich and poor.”  

When it sees itself it should see Africa’s humanity as a whole; it should see itself (in its African manifestation and otherwise) respecting the full humanity of its women. If the church is to be a reflection of, to use *mujerista* theologian Isasi-Díaz’s terminology, the kin-dom of God, “an inclusive community of women and men of all races and tongues,” the church must understand and honor itself in its entirety.  

If Oduyoye’s theological anthropology teaches us of God’s true intention for the creation of humanity, her ecclesiology shows us God’s expression through such joined and mutual-acting creation. Oduyoye invites us to read the church as a closed and incomplete being if not rooted in its intention and open to its possibilities. It cannot close itself off from the potential of God’s surprising use. It must be open to be used in unanticipated ways – this is, in large part, its missional potential.  

The Christian church is the means through which God can be recognized in the world, but it must first learn itself in order to exercise its promise; it must first open its eyes and ears to those who have been marginalized away from the very things the

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resurrection empowers them to do.\textsuperscript{121} The Christian church and its manifestation in the world are key to grasping Oduyoye’s and African women’s theological location.

This location is one of affirming and securing life. Mercy Oduyoye in her doctrinal positioning moves to recognize the potential of life and wellness in all of creation. She assumes God’s creation privy to God’s goodness, love, and life. African women’s theology, and Mercy Oduyoye’s standpoint in particular, reminds the Christian church of God’s plan of abundant life for and within God’s creation.

Conclusion | Word and Witness: A Theology of Life

Women’s theology comes as words that are lived.
Mercy Amba Oduyoye

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Oduyoye’s Legacy

What makes Mercy Oduyoye’s Christian voice so critical to Christian discourse, and African Christianity as a whole, is her emphasis on centralizing African culture while challenging universal racial and gender bias. She makes Christianity her own fashioning the best of African and Christian culture to be that which guides the shape of her voice. Her work is intent on holding both accountable to women as equitable persons within both institutions as this is the beauty of the Christian life—life full, and life together. She creates space and gives permission for African women to be in their entirety. She summons African women to critique their own culture in order to find empowerment from within it.¹ She inverts the ills of Christian and African culture and parses out potential.

Life and the liberation for all grounds the focus of Oduyoye’s work; any theological voice that does not offer this to all does not purport Christian theology, but a

distorted articulation of such. Theology should empower, free, and move its participants towards thriving.

African women’s theology exists for this very reason, to uncover and share that which theology in its true form must be. It guides theology to what it must become in order to live its purpose. Oduyoye’s work is a feminist, postcolonial, liberationist, and womanist necessity within a world of thought that vies to tether the notion of a correct theology to a particular people type, typically male, typically white. Her work refuses to let this be so. She decries this improper theological foundation as lacking a God-centered basis.

African women’s theology, and particularly Mercy Oduyoye’s work for and within it, aims then, to counter the marginalization of women by asserting a clear formulation of God’s interaction with and in the world, Christ’s saving work in being human, humanity’s proper understanding of itself, and fuller understanding of the potential and power of the Christian church towards purporting a loving and interdependent vision of life. Through encountering her view of God, Christ, theological anthropology, and the church, we are made privy to a theological wellspring purposed to promote life and the Giver of life.
Theology with African Women

What does it mean to live a life where one does not have to explain themselves, where one does not have to explain why they are important and necessary for the consideration of the larger whole?

Mercy Oduyoye’s work points to the absurdity of this questioning. No one should have to claim their importance as human beings. By virtue of being human, of being God’s creation, every person has inherent purpose and divine intent. Oduyoye’s work and struggle to articulate women’s worth by virtue of their being creatures made in the image of God illumines the larger problems of theological discourse: its foundations are androcentric, patriarchal, and threaten the fullness of divinity being seen and experienced by many.

For Oduyoye, coming from a matrilineally-focused culture shaped her approach to life and understanding herself. Her life was colored by her wrestling with her story as a Ghanaian woman. What that meant for her culturally, personally, and religiously was that her identity in God trumped the ill-fitted messages from her Akan culture, from colonial Christianity, and from an African conception of Christianity that privilege some at the expense of others. She reminds us that this is not uncommon, though; it is the complex shape of theology for countless African women.

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Theology for African women holds this form because of the circumstances under which it was created. African women’s theology is, thus, a theology of response. It speaks back to the cultural and Christian theological powers and principalities that inhabit and hinder their pursuit of life and relationship under God.

Oduyoye’s feminist perspective points towards her beliefs of what Christian theological discourse should mean to all who encounter it. She proclaims, “Feminism in theology springs from a conviction that a theology of relationships might contribute to bring us closer to human life as God desires it.” Her task is not one of securing the particular interests of a few but of asserting the full humanity of all.

She pushes the academy and the church to understand that all of its members can do and need sound theology. From her social and global position of a Ghanaian woman of Akan descent interacting with various women across the continent, Oduyoye’s work and voice illumines a large crater within Christian theological thought: African women as central theologizing figures are arguably most affected by the practices of Christianity.

**Tilling New Ground: Critiques and Critical Ways Forward**

Oduyoye’s work has cleared the way for many women’s voices to take rightful ownership of the theological landscape. Her dedication and work have tilled the ground

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for theologians after her to push the agenda of African women’s theology forward.

However, despite the depth and breadth of issues she covers, Oduyoye does not take full advantage of generating constructive possibilities of which African women can be the progenitors. I want to argue that if three prospective areas were further tended to, Oduyoye’s theology would have even more reach than it currently has, namely: 1) delineating African women’s sexuality; 2) calling for African men’s theological responsibility, and; 3) extending African women’s diasporic expression beyond Africa.

Within the scope of Oduyoye’s work, conversations around African women’s sexuality are started, but do not reach their full potential. Her approach falls short in three ways. Instead of speaking constructively to African women’s sexuality it: 1) highlights what African women’s sexuality is not, and thus it; 2) asserts a gender-role focus as substitutive for speaking to issues of sexuality, sexuality that is often; 3) not understood apart from heterosexual marriage. To be fair, Oduyoye offers brief thoughts on African women’s sexual liberation, however, marriage seems to be the primary site, if not the only site, of discussing African women’s sexual relevance.

Overall, Oduyoye’s core argument takes on a deconstructive tone and agenda: the grounds for women’s social and sexual limitation come from how men have typically utilized the Christian faith and the texts of the faith, most notably the Bible.

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4 It is important to note that sexual expression can take on numerous forms. Therefore, though it is most fitting to expand the notion to “sexuality” to “sexualities,” for reasons of argumentation, I speak about the range of African women’s “sexualities” (plural, diverse) utilizing language of “sexuality” (singular, general) to describe the overarching notion of embodied expression and being.
While this is certain true, it creates a situation in which African women’s sexuality is not posed as a constructive being on its own, but a deconstructive argument. African women’s sexuality is described primarily through negation; the reader learns what it is not, but do not have a strong grasp on what it actually is and how it might manifest. African women’s sexuality, then, becomes an argument against male-favoring religious logic.

Oduyoye speaks against the problematic aspects of gender roles and gendered social positioning, but offers little alternative to imagining African women’s bodies and how they want to be and express themselves in the world. Refuting gender taboos and limitation is one thing, offering a discourse on African women’s collective feeling towards their sexual expression is another. The lack of conversation around it begs the question of why African women’s sexuality is such a “non-issue” in the Christian church outside of notions of morality5 or further, why African women have not had the space to name the form of their own sexuality.

In Oduyoye’s analyses, liberation from gendered social assumption and freedom of sexual expression are hard to parse out from each other. Sexuality appears to be most important in critiquing the role that marriage and procreation play in men’s expectations of women as argued through male interpretations of Christian scripture. The lines between sexual existence and choice and the social and cultural machinations

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of gender roles are blurred. African women’s sexuality is only known in relation to men and the categories they create for it. Notions of purity and taboo remind us that biological marginalization and women’s sexual expression are inextricably linked. Oduyoye tries to move in a different direction but ultimately is caught by the same trap of reading sexuality’s importance through the lens of heterosexual marriage. She notes the “Christian fear of the ‘flesh,’” but does not parse out bodily perceptions from bodied expression or embodied autonomy.6

Outside of brief mention and critique of a limited Pauline interpretive logic on same-sex love, conversations around sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage are scarce in Oduyoye’s theological assertions. She does give a nod to the interpretive boundaries around same-sex relationality as directly tied to “women’s freedom in Christ” but it is unclear whether this freedom translates into speaking about women’s conditions socially or sexually.7 How does African women’s sexuality manifest? What does it look like? Oduyoye gives us hints, but namely in asking questions about marriage structures. Sexual freedoms within marriage are something African women

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6 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 85-86. Oduyoye rightly names notions of the body, flesh, and purity/pollution as critical to examine in further research.
historically and currently wrestle with.\textsuperscript{8} The cultural reigns on them are tight. But holding them too tightly might limit theological revelation.

Oduyoye glimpses constructive possibility of women’s sexual freedom in \textit{Beads and Strands}. Over and against the argument of heterosexual marriage she asserts that attention to sexuality can be a liberating force for women. She claims, “Men and women are sexually distinct beings who do not necessarily have to be identified with the opposite sex in marriage or in other forms of complementarity. Women are persons in communion, not persons who ‘complete’ the other.”\textsuperscript{9} The most important aspect of human sexuality is not the connection to marriage, but to proper communion.

Oduyoye believes sexuality conversations necessary. For Oduyoye, “Sexuality is a central factor of being human and not a peripheral luxury for intellectual explication.”\textsuperscript{10} It must be taken seriously as a communal issue as it is one that determines relationality. It must be recalibrated to exist in ways that unburden women.\textsuperscript{11}

For many African women theologians, issues such as sexuality are hard to address as they are often burdened with addressing other theological atrocities that

\textsuperscript{8} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 87-88. Oduyoye does begin conversations around the double standards that exist within polygamous marriage for women; she problematizes monogamy as the “correct” sexual standard for them. She makes an interesting point on “correct sexual behavior” that bears further reflection: “A study of polygamy, which western Christians often view as a ‘hangover’ from ‘primitive’ lifestyles, may yield interesting information about its religious imperatives.” Perhaps the answer to sexual possibility can be found in thoroughly examining the kinship systems from which African women and men emerge.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 88.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
affect them; because of this, they lack opportunity for generative conversation around sexuality. This problem, the problem of African women’s apologetics, is rooted deeply in Oduyoye’s theological presence and work. She carries the burdens she did not create; her voice is prevalent primarily in its ability to debunk theological falsities about women. Though her work rings critical for African women’s representation within theology, on the flip side, Oduyoye’s constructive abilities are either stalled or halted by this excess work. She and other women who have followed in her footsteps have little space to create constructive alternative ways of thinking as their time is occupied by having to respond to male misinterpretations of scripture and culture.

Herein lies the problem of theological responsibility: Oduyoye does not give the problem of women’s issues with theology back to African men; she believes that men should take up the case of women but does not clearly or fully state that men must take full responsibility to clean up their own messes before their theological assertions can be taken seriously, again. She does not name outright that men’s voices will regain validity if they admit their wrongdoing and dedicate their work to overturning the myths from which they benefited. This is a radical desire, but a fair one.

For all the trouble they have caused and benefited from Oduyoye does not push African men (and I would add, Western men and women) far enough to fix theological problems reliant on sexism; she does not name that men must redo their theology in order to theologize well in the modern moment. Instead, her work demonstrates that women
must do the theological cleanup of the disarray from which their male counterparts profit.

An example lies in her claims about the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Though powerful in purpose and origin, the Circle still holds some questionable tenets, namely around the desire for male approval (in the form of participation) to ensure a communal focus. While proclaiming their mission to help “cure Africa of wanton sexism and gender insensitivity, by keeping in focus the role of culture and religion”\(^\text{12}\) the Circle necessitates male theological voices to ensure its fulfillment of its mission. Oduyoye firmly advocates for a communal theological foundation, which is a positive and Afro-centric move. But this move also has problematic elements. In this narration the notion of communal influence can be utilized unfairly; in the effort to empower African women, by necessitating African men’s involvement as sign that the movement is working, men are endowed with even more power and influence than they had before. Oduyoye claims that the Circle knows “…we are being heard when our brothers in theology take up these issues, and join us in this effort.”\(^\text{13}\) While this statement is true and the sentiment behind it is understood, it does not fully attend to where responsibility rests for what seems like the lot of theological overhauling work that the Circle was created to address in the first place. Does the


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
confirmation of theological efficacy only come when men join in?\textsuperscript{14} What about the women? Can women hearing each other be enough to confer “being heard”? Are women empowering enough on their own? If not, can communal empowerment include theological responsibility from those actively holding power? Here, Oduyoye’s inclusive and communal moves can be read as defective if not clarified or pushed further. It seems that little to no corrective responsibility lies with the men, instead they are proffered new levels of importance through women’s reparative efforts, efforts designed to refute the very theo-logics that men created, affirm, and/or remain silent about.

Women and men working together does not mean that men can just pick up the intellectual progressive work of African women and continue on without taking responsibility in tangible ways that impact them directly - through their theologies and practices. It must mean that men be the most active agents in this theological repair. Women being saddled with the job of fixing the oppressive logics that have rendered them socially, culturally, and theologically lesser does not align with the mode of women’s empowerment Oduyoye’s theological position promotes.

Empowering African women could instead mean unburdening them from being forced to defend themselves and their theological presence. This should instead be men’s work. In the name of communal good, this realignment makes sense bestowing

\textsuperscript{14} Mercy Amba Oduyoye, \textit{Introducing African Women’s Theology} (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2001), 25. Oduyoye would call this move one towards cultural and religious interdependence which in my opinion, serves in both an empowering and limiting capacity.
responsibility to amend faults where it should have been in the first place. If both
genders take on this responsibility, the bulk of the work will be carried forth by African
women - as the genesis of a lot of their work has been defending their place in theology,
the Christian church, and religious conversation in general. A communal approach with
no male accountability will continue the tradition of African women’s theological
burdening. African women doing theological apologetics is not the same as having equal
weight within theological conversations. If Oduyoye pushed harder for men to not only
admit their errors but to also fix them, the scope of African theology could take on an
entirely different tone and have a potentially larger global impact.

It bears repeating: Oduyoye has already done a lot of theological heavy lifting
over the course of her career. She has and continues to pave the way for African women
to do theology with agency. The problems around sexuality and theological
responsibility are not necessarily her problems, but the issues that arise in the field that
she is in as well as based on who she is. Over the decades Oduyoye’s work has taken on
the greatest causes; it has focused on paving the way for African women all over the
world to do African women’s theology how they see fit for their particular contexts, and
rightly so.

Through her work alone African women’s theological vision gained more
continental visibility and prevalence. But Oduyoye’s work is reaching further; the
expansion of African women’s voices and theologies are impacted and impactful beyond
the continent of Africa alone. African women all over the globe have theological contributions to make; inspired by Oduyoye’s determination, now they will have space to do so.¹⁵

Oduyoye and others assert what they call a theology of life where African women do theology because “Africans are at home...when they can celebrate life.”¹⁶ Physical, economic, and spiritual well-being fund the crux of African women’s theology, a movement that has global importance and promise. How far can we take it? Far enough to reach the work of black theology and womanism in the United States.¹⁷ Far enough to inspire the next generation of African women living outside the continent continuing to wrestle with the legacies that colonialism, racism, and sexism have bestowed upon their stories.

The impact of Oduyoye’s theological reflections and offerings reach forward and can reach further still. Oduyoye’s ambition to inspire women who take their place in “global woman-centered theology” is being realized in the present day.¹⁸ As long as the need exists to uplift women into proper life and human dignity,¹⁹ African women’s theological work is never done. Groundbreaking possibilities must be the generative

¹⁷Ibid, 123.
¹⁸Ibid.
¹⁹Ibid, 126.
sites for African women’s continued theological annunciation. This will not only create stronger foundations for life in Africa, but for women’s life all over the world.

**The Power of One Woman**

Oduyoye is a leading figure in African Christian discourse for a reason. Her work carefully teases out the foundations of oppressive practices, offers a corrective, and hopes in the future and in the potential of the Christian church for good and for change in the world. She asserts Africa as a generative place for groundbreaking theology. She believes in the power of African thought contributing to the understanding of how and where God is at work in the world.

Oduyoye urgently asserts a holistic theological anthropology in order for the church to do theology well. She writes to help the church understand itself, in its strengths and weaknesses. The same goes for African culture and tradition. She identifies its places of promise and the areas that need work. But her voice, at times liberative and at other points constructive, holds both – she functions as prophet and priest to the Christian church in Africa as well as in the West, to men and women. Her care for the church is palpable. Her ecumenical involvement alone testifies a theologian hopeful for the future of the church and invested in its growth and change.

Oduyoye makes space for those denied room in Christian theological imagination. The theological space-clearing that her voice does is demonstrative of her powerful initiative to hear from those marginalized and ignored. Her work has always
been and will always be about others. The use of communal language in her work is not by chance. She exemplifies that a holistic theologizing approach – across ethnic, gender, and racial lines - yields the truest form of Christian theology.

Oduyoye is not fixated on creating a theological name for herself, but works so that African women will be seen as equal representatives of African theological and Christian theological voice. She believes the African voice, and African women’s voices, just as valuable as any other branch of theological thought.

Oduyoye’s work is a declaration in itself that African women deserve room at the theological table, for there is room – if the table is large enough. Her work declares that her voice and the voices of many others are ripe for theological inquiry. Oduyoye is a theological figure cognizant of theology’s past, current condition, and future promise. Her work will always ask what is needed in order to push theology forward.

Still active on the theological scene even today, Oduyoye embodies the will of the Christian church. She is determined to seek justice for all of God’s creation, extend loving-kindness, and humbly walk in her calling as a teacher, theologian, advocate, and African woman.
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Biography

Oluwatomisin Oredein was born in Lagos, Nigeria. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies in 2007 from the University of Virginia. She matriculated to Duke University Divinity School and received her Masters of Divinity in 2010 as well as her Th.D. in Theology and Ethics in 2017. Oluwatomisin was a Pre-Dissertation fellow with the Forum for Theological Exploration (formerly the Fund for Theological Education) in 2014-2015 and a Dissertation Fellow in 2016-2017. She was also a Reconciliation scholarship recipient at Duke University Divinity School from 2011 to 2015.