

Voice of the voiceless: The legacy of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

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The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) formally came into existence in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. Under the charismatic leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Circle sought to be the voice of African Christian women at the grass roots level. To this end research and publication was and still is one of the major pillars and activities of the Circle. The main objective of the Circle is 'to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their own experience of religion and culture on this continent'. In this regard the Circle has been and continues to be the voice for and on behalf of the African woman in religion, culture and theology. However, 25 years down the line there is need for an evaluation of the legacy of the Circle. How has the Circle been a voice for the voiceless, a mentoring instrument for women venturing into the academia? This article seeks to do this evaluation by examining the activities of the Circle including research publication.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article seeks to evaluate the achievements of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in relation to the Circle's stated objectives. The article picks up the notion of the Circle theologians as the voice of the voiceless women of Africa. The general approach of the article brings together discussions on social issues like gender, poverty and marginalisation as well as language. Theological and religious perspectives on these issues are understood from a Circle point of view.

Introduction

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) formally came into existence in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. However, there were other meetings and associations prior to the inauguration of the Circle. These associations both inspired and supported the Circle. They include the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the meeting of African Women Theologians held in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1980. Under the charismatic leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Circle sought to be the voice of African women at the grass roots level. Today the Circle boasts several national chapters and regional representation in Eastern Africa, West Africa, Central and Southern Africa. There is also representation in Egypt. African women theologians purposed to be the voice of the voiceless through research and documentation of the theology of African women, especially at the grass roots level. They aimed at making the African woman visible and her existence given its rightful recognition and dignity.

The Circle has several other objectives that guide and contextualise the desire to be the voice. These objectives include research and publication on pertinent issues that affect women, coming together at national, regional and Pan-African conferences and workshops to share their research findings and to hear each other's stories. These gatherings provide safe spaces for women to be themselves and to share the experiences that inform their narratives and help create their theologies. The Circle and its members are mentors to one another. The mentoring project helps younger and upcoming women in religion, culture and the academia to begin to understand the importance of their own stories and also the stories of other women. The mentoring programme is essential for the future of the Circle as it brings into the fold new and younger members even as mature and aging ones begin to grow weary.

This article seeks to evaluate the Circle's performance in relation to these objectives. It specifically discusses the notion of voice, both figuratively and literally, in order to evaluate the Circle's performance as the voice of African women in religion and culture. A detailed evaluation was done by Musa Dube (2009). However, this was specifically in relation to the Circle's engagement with HIV and AIDS. She evaluates the research and publications from members of the Circle in the 5 years after the Pan-African gathering in 2002. In contrast to this, this article presents a more general survey, focusing on the general achievements of the Circle in relation to the general Circle objectives as stated above.

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The Circle as voice of the voiceless

The overarching objective of the Circle is to be the voice of African women, especially at the grass roots level. Research and publication were to form a foundational component of this voice. But the Circle realised early on that the raw data for this would come from the lived experiences of women themselves. Nyambura (1997) decries the voicelessness while calling on the Circle theologians to fill the gap created by the missing voice. Hearing them in speech was (and I believe) will always be Mercy Oduyoye's dream and clarion call. Although writing from a different context and for a different audience, Audre Lorde (1984) aptly captures the vision and mission of the Circle thus:

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. (p. 43)

By committing themselves to becoming the voice of voiceless African women, Circle members took cognisance of the fact that being voiceless is a symptom of many other negative conditions or social ailments that afflict the women of Africa. The Free Dictionary (2007) defines voicelessness as a state of having no voice, rendering the individual mute or silent. Voicelessness can also refer to uttering something without the vibration of the vocal cords. In everyday discourse, voicelessness can therefore be used both literally and figuratively. Literally the individual whose vocal cords are impaired in one way or another is therefore described as dumb. Figuratively and literally the dumb individual cannot express or articulate his or her feelings. Furthermore the term dumb is used to connote stupidity or lack of intelligence (Ayanga 2014).

At another level voicelessness is indicative of a lack of dignity born out of the fact that the voiceless one has no means of expressing even her or his own dignity. It implies the failure or the lack of interest of those around such an individual to listen or at least pay attention to what he or she has to say. Joan Bolker (1979) gives one of the most incisive descriptions of voicelessness. She says that voicelessness is:

the inability to write or speak our central concerns. Or to write but as a disembodied persona who bears no relation to our inherent voices. We say only what we think we're expected to say, and end up telling lies or half-truths. Voicelessness is also feeling powerless to speak and sensing that there is no one out there who speaks for us. *There is an epidemic of voicelessness among women.* (n.p., [author's own italics])

Each aspect of Bolker's definition above can be applied to African women in culture and religion. Not being able to write or speak their central concerns is an apt description of women in general and the African woman in particular. This was a major challenge that the Circle has sought to respond to in its 25 years of existence. Sociopolitical, religious and theological processes have tended to go as if the woman does not exist. If she exists, she has no concerns and if she has any concerns at all she does not understand them. She is not

capable of articulating them. For this reason, the man would articulate them and voice them on her behalf. This reflects back on our earlier definition of voicelessness: that of being dumb. Women are deemed to be dumb because they are without a voice. But they are also dumb because they are stupid, making it necessary for the man to talk on her behalf. The centrality of voice in African women's theology cannot be overemphasised. The major problem of this situation is that the articulation is done from an 'Other's' perspective. This has been the case especially in the articulation of women's concerns in theology.

For years, African women in religion and culture have had no say in the development of theology. Consequently it has been necessary for women in religion and culture to find a voice and a language that is different from 'that which has been provided out of the dominant culture' which is essentially patriarchal (Neuger 2001:68). Voicelessness is like an insidious disease. Audre Lorde (1984:42) points out that the one who remains silent is never a whole person. Thus women who have no voice are not fully human, for to be human is to express our feelings and our central concerns. What is important to human beings 'must be spoken, made verbal and shared even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood' (Lorde 1984:40). This is because the one who is silent is invisible. She or he believes that truth comes from others, even truth about their own identity, fears and expectations. Getting a voice suddenly throws them in the limelight and makes them more vulnerable than they were when hidden behind the shroud of silence. In purposing to be the voice of the voiceless Circle theologians were exposing themselves to criticism and possible ridicule especially from patriarchal institutions in religion and in society at large. In some ways the Circle was aware of this challenge, but this did not deter them. They went ahead in spite of and despite of it. Nyambura (1997) alludes to this awareness in the following words:

It is enough to say a great challenge is ahead of us which demands boldness and courage. Speaking from the Christian context, we are advocates for a voice which has been missing in the decisions and the shaping of the African church and theology that we wish to see taken seriously by every Christian ... (pp. 77-83)

The challenge to take responsibility was taken seriously by the Circle foremothers and fore sisters. In the preface to Mercy Oduyoye's book *Introducing African Women's Theology* (2001) the writer describes Mercy as 'the Voice who brought the struggle of Africa to the Christian theological scene' and that 'in this book is an attempt to give voice to the growing community of African Women theologians ...' In seeking to be the voice of the voiceless, the Circle adopted a specific approach to doing theology. In its formative years Circle theology was narrative theology as women told and retold their stories hitherto unwritten and unarticulated.

Narrative theology

Circle women sought to dialogue with their cultures and their communities of faith. They sought to name their pain

and the perpetrators of their pain. Women began to voice their experiences in the context of culture and religion in ways hitherto unknown and untested. In this way women in the Circle have helped one another to create new narratives as well as develop new interpretative lenses. The Circle becomes the interpretive community. This has helped women in religion and culture as well as those in academia to create new narratives that would help in the creation of new stories. New narratives would help women to create a future in which they would have a say in their own self-understanding by interpreting their experiences from their own perspective.

Thus Circle theologians observed, described and recorded how women at the grass roots do rather than think theology (Nyambura 1997). This theology was and is born out of the lived experiences of the African woman. Women are encouraged to tell their stories as a way of doing theology. The raw data would be the basis of the research and publication that Circle theologians were committed to. African women would not only tell their stories and create new ones for the future; they would also recognise the fact that they are not just spectators but they are also actors on the stage of life. Women would not only tell their stories, they would also be encouraged to reflect on them. The telling of the story gives voice to women and their lived experiences. It makes the women, their lives and their experiences both audible and visible. The reflections make the role of the Circle as the interpretative community necessary. Kwok Pui-lan (2005:103) alludes to the importance of such a community when Biblical interpretation shifts from traditional methods to newer and more existentially based ones. By storying their experiences, women would achieve two very important objectives of the Circle. They would voice their experiences and they would become aware of not only the similarities but also the differences in each other's experiences. Hearing and listening to one's own story certainly gives perspectives that an outsider quite easily misses. Women would thus begin to see the reality of their lives from their own perspective. They begin to see the disconnect between their reality as described by outsiders and reality as experienced by them. It also provides them with the opportunity to analyse the experiences in the light of their culture and their religious traditions; to begin to ask the 'why' questions rather than simply accept that this is the way it has been and the way it will always be.

Voice through research and publication

The narratives that women gave (as indicated above) formed the raw data for Circle publications. For members of the Circle the saying 'publish or perish' took on an added perspective. It became meaningful outside of the academia. It was imperative for the stories to be made known to the rest of the world. Failure to do this would mean that the women of Africa would continue to perish for lack of knowledge. They would continue to perish in silence. It is in this way that research and publication became a voice of the voiceless both in academia and in society at large. The publications make

the voice of African women be heard, their experiences be recognised and their contribution be recognised as valid.

In the preface to the Circle publication *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (2003:xii) edited by Phiri, Haddad and Masenya Kanyoro notes that the mission of the Circle is to participate in research with a view to publishing theological literature by African women. Earlier on in the preface to her book *Hearing and Knowing*, Oduyoye (2001) had expressed the same objective for the Circle. She notes that members of the Circle:

have embarked on research and publication about what they learnt, studied, heard and come to know of Christianity and its interaction with African religion and culture with particular reference to women's lives(ii). (n.p.)

Most if not all the literature would be about women and for women. The literature would also be a documentation of Circle members' engagement with various issues of concern in church and society.

The Circle came into being at a time that the world was just beginning to realise the magnitude of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The world was waking up to the realisation that HIV and AIDS did in fact have a woman's face. The most ostracised and stigmatised members of society were women with HIV and AIDS. In Africa in particular, women were often blamed for bringing the virus into families. They would be thrown out of the marital homes when and if their spouses died of AIDS related complications. Women in Africa were often victims of negative cultural and religious beliefs. These often taught that HIV and AIDS were a result of sin, broken taboos and witch craft. Thus at their meeting held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in August of 2002, Circle women presented papers on HIV and AIDS and how religion, culture and other social practices helped make the woman more vulnerable and susceptible to HIV infection. A series of publications came out of these papers, at least one book out of each region of the Circle. As of 2003, there were 31 books published. Musa Dube (2009) gives a list of books, articles and chapters in books attributed to Circle theologians in specific response to the challenge of HIV and AIDS. Other publications have come out since then, but we should note that since Cameroon in 2007, the zeal for research and publication seems to have been significantly diminished. For example, the Eastern African region has not published as a Circle since the publication by edited by Hinga, Kubai, Mwaura and Ayanga in 2008. The themes suggested in Cameroon have largely not been addressed through publication.

However, in relation to past publication we must mention and recognise the work of our foremothers whose research and publication have given voice to African women and African women theologies. Oduyoye's publications in general have done this. But of note are *Daughters of Anowa* (1995) and *Introducing African Women's Theologies* (2001), Kanyoro's writings on cultural hermeneutics (1995) and other methodological issues and Musa Dube's (2003; Dube & Kanyoro 2004) efforts to assist theological institutions to

integrate HIV and AIDS into their programmes and curricula. These women, among many others, have made the Circle and its work recognised and appreciated globally. The challenge is for the Circle to continue this noble task of critiquing each other's work and facing methodological issues head on. There is the need to move on from mere descriptive phenomenology to analysis and interpretation as these did.

Creating awareness

In choosing to become the voice of the voiceless, in helping African women in religion and culture to begin to see the world through their own eyes sometimes for the very first time, the Circle was not only making women visible, it was making the church and the communities at large aware of the existence of people who had hitherto been ignored or whose existence was of no consequence. Women were challenged to become aware of their own existence but also of their ability to define their own identity and to tell their own story. The Circle as a community of women doing theology made them aware of each other's existence. More importantly the Circle has made its members aware of their common heritage as women, a heritage of voicelessness. African women theologians would be made aware that they must move and work in solidarity with each other and with other vulnerable people in fighting the tyrannies of silence and oppression. Self-awareness is essential in our self-understanding which in turn is fundamental in our awareness and our understanding of others. Self-awareness has an impact on our understanding of God too. The Circle would in its history create awareness of the silent majority in the pews of our churches. Circle theologians would create the awareness of the fact that women are missing from the pulpits because they have not been given the resources by which they would become effective occupants of pulpits. The absence of women in theological institutions thus became a matter of grave concern for the Circle.

Women in theological education

During the missionary era and several decades after, theological training for women was viewed as neither important nor necessary. This was mainly because such training was aimed at producing candidates for ordained ministry and women's candidature was not a consideration. In many of the African Initiated Churches, formal theological training was not a basic requirement even for the men in leadership positions. The leading and direction of the Holy Spirit were the main requirement. But with access to developed-world education made available by missionaries, women in the African church began to desire much more than the mere basics. Women began to better understand what it means for them to be the church in Africa as expressed by Phiri and Nadar (2005). They sought to understand and interpret the message of the gospel for themselves and from a woman's perspective. Opportunities to pursue higher education became more and more available to African women after the political independence of their various countries. In a survey done by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in

1996, it is noted that women's access to theological education in Africa was often slow and sometimes painful. Oduyoye (1997) notes that by 1978, roughly two decades after the political independence of many African nations, women admitted to departments of religion in public universities in anglophone Africa were few. But these institutions represented the most equal opportunities for women to pursue higher education in theology and religious studies (Oduyoye 1997:65). In some of these institutions, women's enrolment in these departments has slowly overtaken that of men. For example, in Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, admissions to the Master of Arts in religion programme generally tends to have more women than men. Although theological institutions were slow to admit women in their own right, they have continued to increase the numbers of women admissions over time. But challenges and obstacles still abound.

The voice of women in decision making and leadership positions have thus remained muted because of the lack of opportunities for the training that would equip them with both knowledge and necessary skills. Women fill the pews while the men occupy the pulpits. Women in church have generally been recipients of theology rather than initiators of theology based on their own lived experiences. Women at the grass roots continue to be church without having a say in some of the very basic and personal aspects of their lives. The Circle took up the challenge to raise awareness to this disparity evident in the church and society. It advocates for the admission of more women in theological training institutions as a matter of policy. Ruth Muthei James (1999) notes the high level of disparity both in access to and in the practice of skills acquired at theological schools in Kenya. The obstacles that women face in their efforts to access theological education are different from those faced by men. Even their post-college experiences are vastly different. She further points out that even with theological education women are still relegated to performing roles that are perceived to be female like making tea for visitors, teaching Sunday school, or just being helpers to their minister husbands. James (1999) observes in conclusion that:

the issue of theological education for women in Kenya needs to be re-examined. As long as official religious leadership is considered the domain of men, theological education will remain male oriented. Such a scenario gives women few chances in pursuing theological education. (p. 118)

One of her suggestions for changing this situation is for the curricular in theological institutions to include more material about women and, we dare to add, by women and for women. It is in response to this type of advocacy by Circle theologians that St Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya, which first admitted female students in 1976, has made a conscious effort to develop a course that befits Muthei's suggestion. This is the course entitled *African Women's Theologies*. In my view this is a course that encapsulates the Circle vision. In a discussion of this course, Mombo and Joziassie (2014) point out that the course seeks to actively engage the students in

gender analysis of the church leadership roles while making them aware and critically involved with theological insights from African women's perspective. Even with its position as a role model in theological training, St Paul's has not yet achieved gender parity in enrolment of its students, but offering this kind of course already goes a long way in challenging the status quo as well as encouraging the students to constantly examine the place of women and their continued lack of participation in both church and society. It gives the female students the space to both speak and write their central concerns even as they seek to make a niche for themselves in a predominantly male space. Through critical engagement and analysis and through writing out their concerns from the perspective of African women, St Paul's contributes to another aspect of the Circle's endeavour to be the Voice. The creation of this course was spearheaded by Esther Mombo and Heleen Joziassse, both of whom are members of the Circle.

Conclusion and recommendations

I conclude this article by echoing Nyambura Njoroge's (1997) words:

Our wise foresisters and foremothers marched on and it is upon their shoulders we stand and together say 'no' to violence, exclusion, marginalization, and silence. Daughters of Africa have heard the call to 'arise', 'wake up', *AMKA*. To the churches and other Faith Based Organizations; to our communities and to policy makers of Africa and beyond we say 'Take time to read what we have to say. (p. 83)

This challenge must also be taken seriously by the Circle members themselves. The need to read and critique each other's work cannot be overemphasised. We must read each other's work and use it as basis for further research and teaching in our institutions. Having listened and responded to the call to arise, the Circle must continue to move and not stand still. The Circle cannot and must not allow the voice that rung out loud and clear from Ghana to Addis Ababa, from Cameroun to Kempton Park in South Africa to be muted once again. In doing this we must be aware of the dangers involved even in the attempt to be the voice of the voiceless. In this regard we must guard against turning our voices into mere noise. This can happen when we fail to listen to each other and when we are unforgiving of each other's shortcomings and weaknesses. It can happen if we allow ourselves to forget the initial spirit of the Circle by allowing regionalism and other artificial boundaries to divide us.

African women doing theology must move on holding each other's hands to respond to current pressing issues. These include challenges brought about by religious and political fundamentalism, the radicalisation of young people, human trafficking, and neo slavery among others. Many mothers are shedding tears because they have lost their children, some as young as 10 years to radical groups. Women and girls continue to be lured away to foreign lands with the promise of a better life only to end up as slaves and sex toys for their employers. The 2013 Pan-African Circle conference theme

was related to the search for safe spaces for women and girls. Women and girls are unsafe both in private and in public places. They are not safe in their workplaces and in the homes (increase in rape cases by fathers and teachers). We shall do well to engage with society to respond to these seemingly insurmountable challenges. What should be our theological response to these challenges? Domestic violence continues almost unabated in our societies. Women bear the brunt of this violence. More research and analysis of social contexts that breed and encourage violence should continue to be our focus.

The Circle must also continue to engage with the issues that gave birth to it. There are women in Africa whose voices are still whispers, whose experiences are regarded as non-issues and who still wallow in abject poverty. In spite of great gains in some of our communities, the girl child remains an endangered species. Among the Pokot and the Turukana of Kenya, for example, some kind of parity has been achieved in school enrolment but the problem of retention for the girl child remains a great challenge. The Circle needs to continue engagement with culture and cultural practices that make it difficult to go beyond the mere basics of primary school.

The Circle purposed to be the voice of women in religion and culture. These women would be from all religions and subcultures of the continent of Africa. The Circle has not been very successful in being the voice of non-Christian religions. With all the current interreligious challenges in the continent, the Circle needs to be much more ecumenical and inclusive of particularly Islamic and African Traditional voices and perspectives.

This article set out to give a general evaluation of the Circle's performance and achievements in its 25 years of existence. A lot has been achieved as evidenced by the research and publications. There is evidence that theological institutions are working towards gender parity in their admission processes as well as in the course content. Further evaluation is necessary in order for us to see what the actual impact of the Circle and its activities in society is.

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