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(118) WOMEN IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Hazel O. Ayanga

Introduction

The gospels, and the Bible in general, indicate that women have always been part of the Christian church. In some accounts, women were the first people to receive and proclaim the good news of the risen Christ. There is also significant evidence of women's involvement and activity in the early Christian church. It is suggested that perhaps the major form of involvement was in house churches. However, as Christianity grew and expanded to various parts of the world, the role of women has consistently diminished. Church historians attest to this, pointing out that, by the fifth century, women's visible activity in the church began to be curtailed by the development of a hierarchy of leadership that was predominantly male. Women were excluded from the priesthood. Thus a situation was created in which men were predominantly in the pulpit while women filled the pews. This is the organization that the Christian missionaries carried with them to Africa and other mission fields. Western Christian missionaries were greatly influenced by the ideas and teachings of early church fathers and theologians. These include Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom, and reformation leaders like Martin Luther, among others. They were all agreed on the subordination of women and the inability of women to hold any leadership positions, both in and out of the church. They carried these persuasions to the mission field as well. Nevertheless, women played and continue to play a pivotal role in African Christianity and in Christian mission.¹

Historians record many women of faith in Christian antiquity.² Some of the early church fathers and theologians came to faith because of the examples of their mothers and other women. Augustine finally became a Christian as a result of the prayers and teaching of his mother, Monica. John Chrysostom's mother played a pivotal role in his Christian upbringing. Ironically, these church leaders have little or nothing positive to say about women.

The Missionary Era

John Baur, in his *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, published in 1998, recognizes the place of women in African Christianity by saying that 'the co-operation of women was the greatest innovation in evangelization'.³ Although many early missionaries were men, several brought their wives and children along to the mission fields. Although these women did not participate in activities like church planting, they initiated and participated in activities that were later to have far-reaching effects on women in general and the Church in Africa in particular. Missionary women were not just interested in the spiritual welfare of women in Africa. They took keen interest in their social status and welfare. To help improve the status of women, many missionary women were involved in the provision of medical facilities

¹ For detailed historical examples both from Africa as well as Asia see: Christine Lienemann-Perrin, Atola Longkumer, and Afrie Songco Joye (eds.), 'Putting Names with Faces: Women's Impact in Mission History.' (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 389; See also a related review: *International Review of Mission*, Volume 102, Issue 2, November (2013), 264–266,

² "Catherine Kroeger. "The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church." *Christian History Institute*.

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/women-in-the-early-church/> (accessed 29 March, 2016)

³ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: an African Church History*. Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 1998, 107.

and the establishment of girls' schools. This includes women like Lula Schmelzenbach⁴ of the Nazarene Mission in Swaziland and Twyla Ludwig⁵ of the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) who worked at the Kima Mission where she single-handedly started a girls' school and taught women to cook and sew.⁶ For missionary women, as for the African women among whom they ministered, leadership in the church was not an option. They concentrated on perfecting 'women's roles' as defined by their denominations and church tradition. Catholic sisters were also involved in this work. Baur records that they were often able to do and go where the monks and Fathers would not go. These included the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood who worked among the Zulu, and the Missionary Sisters of Africa who started work in North Africa around 1869, and the Sisters of St Joseph who sent Sr Anne Marie Javouhy to Senegal about 1819.⁷ In all these activities, women still had to be under the leadership of their male counterparts.

But women found an avenue for service and greater participation in associations and movements. The Mothers' Union for women in the Anglican Communion,⁸ the Women's Guild in the Presbyterian Church⁹ and *Chigwirizano cha Amayi a Chikristu* in Malawi and the Women's Ministries of the Church of God are examples of women's participation in African Christianity. These and other similar organizations and movements gave African women an avenue for self-expression and, indeed, for the development of leadership skills. They gave women an opportunity not only to *do* something but also to *be* something or somebody. Many of the movements, like the Mothers' Union, started off as support groups for women, offering some kind of basic education for them. However, these organizations continued to encourage women to play service roles rather than church leadership roles *per se*. Some of the mother churches were both cynical and unsupportive of these organizations and their activities. Indeed, in some cases, the oversight of these women's associations was taken over by men. There was the fear that these movements would become churches within their churches and thus challenge both the unity and the leadership hierarchies of the larger church.¹⁰

But women continued to be church in the best way they knew how – and within the confines of the strictly patriarchal framework in which they existed. They cleaned the church buildings, they taught Sunday school and they made tea for visitors and members as need arose. They arranged the flowers and were ushers during the Sunday services. They supported one another by creating prayer cells and prayer groups. In some cases they created prayer partner cells where two or three met either weekly or monthly and prayed for their own specific needs.¹¹ They comforted each other and in some cases formed widows' associations to help widows to be firm against some of the cultural practices that were deemed harmful and unfair to them.¹² Those whose husbands were in church ministry assisted them as best they could, without being too forward or obtrusive. Thus, women in the African Church served and supported the men without

⁴ She published the biography of her husband, providing also a lot of details on her own work: Lula Schmelzenbach, *Missionary Prospector: A Life Story of Harmon Schmelzenbach – Missionary to South Africa* (Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1936) – See more at: www.whdl.org/content/missionary-prospector-life-story-harmon-schmelzenbach-missionary-south-africa#sthash.d3zQvZBb.dpuf.

⁵ See: Twyla I. Ludwig, *Watching the Cooking Pot* (Prestonsburg, KY: Reformation Publishers, , 2010).

⁶ Dana Lee Robert *American women in Mission: A Social History of their Thought and Practice*. (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 238.

⁷ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity*, 184.

⁸ See: www.mothersunion.org/media-centre/our-history.

⁹ See: http://pceaheadoffice.org/WOMANS_GUILD.html.

¹⁰ Isabel Apawo Phiri. *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Malawi*. (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2000), 80.

¹¹ This was something I witnessed in my home. My mother had several women as prayer partners. They would meet on different days of the week for this purpose.

¹² These included polygamy, wife inheritance and female circumcision among others.

necessarily participating in leadership or decision-making processes. It was understood that they could do this without formal theological education.

Women in African Initiated Churches

Whereas women in general stayed within the established churches and denominations, the spirit of unrest that swept through the African Church during the missionary period resulted in some women leaving to form their own churches or to join those formed by others. This unrest was the result of general dissatisfaction with European control and governance of both church and state. The fact that women were not formally trained in theology meant that they could not be ordained, and thus were excluded from ordained ministry as well as from other leadership roles. Opportunities for self-expression were also limited. The emergence of churches initiated by Africans for Africans seemed to provide the much longed-for space for women to be truly themselves. It gave them the opportunity to be both African and Christian. Women play prominent roles in these churches although very few are led by women. A few exceptions include the Cherubim and Seraphim church of West Africa. This African church was co-founded by Moses Orimolade and Captain Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon.¹³ The latter finally took over the leadership of the entire movement. But this did not go down well with her male counterpart. He, together with others, tried to convince her to be the head of all the women in the movement rather than be seen as the topmost leader of both men and women.¹⁴ Others include the Christian Catholic Apostolic Stone Church in Zion of South Africa which gives women the space to be leaders and to exercise full authority in the church. Gaudencia Aoko co-founded the Legio Maria Church in Kenya with Simeon Ondetto, in 1963. But by 1968, women were already being sidelined from the leadership of the church. This led Aoko to found her own church of the same name. The Legio Maria (Legion of Mary) is unique in that it is the largest existing African Initiated church with roots in the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵ Women in these and other African Initiated Churches are recognized as healers and prophets, as well as providers of pastoral care and ministry to the poor and vulnerable in society. They have continued to be church in vibrant and exuberant ways that were not open to them in western and missionary churches.

African Women and 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 western education made available by missionaries, women in the African Church began to desire much more than the mere basics. 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 survey¹⁶ done by Mercy

¹³ Brigid M. Sackey, *New Direction in Gender and Religion: The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches*. (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006).

¹⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

¹⁵ http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/364890/Legio_Maria; see also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legio_Maria.

¹⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye. 'Theological Education for Women in Africa' in *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God. Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women*

Amba Oduyoye in 1996, it is noted that women's access to theological education in Africa was often slow and sometimes painful. Oduyoye 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 still few.¹⁷ But these institutions represented the most equal opportunities for women to pursue higher education in theology and religious studies. In some of these institutions, the enrolment of women in these departments has slowly overtaken that of men. For example, in Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, the current Master of Arts in Religion programme has three women and only one male student. Although Theological Institutions were slow to admit women in their own right, they have continued to increase the numbers of women admissions over time.

The voices of women in decision-making and leadership positions have thus remained muted because of the lack of opportunities in the training that would equip them with both knowledge and necessary skills. Women still fill the pews while the men still 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 grassroots continue to be church without having a say in some of the very basic and personal aspects of their lives. It is this lack of voice for women that the Circle of African Women Theologians has sought to address since its inception.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

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 1980.¹⁸ Under the charismatic leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Circle sought to be the voice of African Christian women at the grassroots level. To this end, research and publication was and still is one of the major pillars and activities of the Circle. Indeed, 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'.¹⁹ Several publications attest to the achievement of this objective.²⁰ Today the Circle boasts of several national chapters and regional representation in Eastern Africa, West Africa, Central and Southern Africa. There is also representation in Egypt.

Conclusion

Women have always been active participants in African Christianity. Generally, their participation has not been in the public domain and therefore not publicly acknowledged. Nevertheless, women have been the foundation of the African Church by living their faith and leading by example rather than by word alone. They have given the church in Africa a theology of life, born out of their lived experience as African Christian women living in Africa with all its complexities and challenges.

Theologians, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Accra: Sam Wood, 1997), 65.

¹⁷ Oduyoye, "Theological Education for Women in Africa"

¹⁸ Oduyoye, *Transforming Power*, 1.

¹⁹ Musimbi Kanyoro in her keynote speech in Oduyoye, *Transforming power*, 11.

²⁰ Each region has at least two publications, in addition to those that come out of the Pan African conferences.

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