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# THE CONCEPTION OF THE CIRCLE OF CONCERNED AFRICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIANs: IS IT AFRICAN OR WESTERN?<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was largely conceived as African, and that it addresses the issues of African women. The Circle approaches the issue of women's liberation from an African perspective, and is not based on a Western concept. Thus, we will show how Mercy Amba Oduyoye and her mother experienced liberation in the African context. Furthermore, by reflecting on the experiences of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and her mother in the context of the men who formed part of their world (their husbands, grandfathers and uncles), we will show how the reinterpretation of oppressive African cultures by men can bring about the liberation of African women. This is in keeping with the agenda of the Circle, namely to liberate women in the church and in society. The ecumenical bodies merely provided the structures within which the Circle was organized. The influence of Western feminist theologies enshrined in the ecumenical bodies with which Mercy Amba Oduyoye was associated, therefore had only a limited impact on the conception of the Circle.

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1 This article is based on a PhD thesis submitted by Ms RN Fiedler in 2010 at the University of the Free State under the supervision of Prof. JW Hofmeyr, Professorextraordinary in the Department of Ecclesiology, University of the Free State. The title of the thesis is "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: History and Theology (1989-2007)".

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In August 1988, Mercy Amba Oduyoye assembled a group of African women in the offices of the World Council of Churches in Geneva to strategize the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth referred to as “the Circle”). Most of these women were academics in the field of religion and culture. All of them also belonged to the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The primary objective of the Circle was to investigate African women’s theologies, and to record and publish research in this regard. The Circle was officially launched in Ghana in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Since then, it has had a profound influence on academic reflections in the discipline of theology, with particular reference to the dignity and role of women in the church and in society. However, the fact that the Circle came into being within an ecumenical environment, has led to some allegations that it is Western in nature, and that it addresses issues pertaining to the West. This article argues that the Circle is definitely African and that its agenda in respect of African women’s liberation is consistent with African culture. Thus, the fact that the Circle was conceived in an ecumenical environment does not imply that it had a Western origin.

In the case study that forms the basis of this article, it will be shown that Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s mother experienced liberation within the African culture because the men in her family reinterpreted oppressive African cultures. This – rather than any influence of the West – was the crucial factor. The Western influence that was exerted on the Circle by the ecumenical bodies with which Mercy Amba Oduyoye was associated, was limited in extent.

The authors of this article, and especially Rachel Fiedler, write as insiders. The approach that is followed falls within the academic field of historical theology. Rachel Fiedler joined the Circle in 2001. She has met Mercy Amba Oduyoye and has also interacted with her at Circle meetings. Although Rachel Fiedler is not from Nigeria (the home country of Mercy’s husband) or Ghana (Mercy’s country of origin), she has visited Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Ghana. Data for this article were collected through the perusal of documents at the Talitha Cumi Centre in Ghana, and through the study of relevant literature. In addition, Rachel Fiedler also gathered information through oral sources. The major systematic work that propagates the notion that the Circle is Western was written by Carrie Pemberton (Pemberton 2003), who alleges that the Circle absorbed the ideas of white North American women. She

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2 Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the International Planning Committee (IPC) organized the first Africa-wide Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle) Conference, held in Ghana in 1989. This conference and the preceding Africa-wide Circle conferences are referred to as Convocations.

also points to the relationship between Circle theology and global institutions such as EATWOT,<sup>3</sup> the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, amongst others. On the other hand, works written by pioneer Circle members on the beginnings of the Circle have clearly indicated that the Circle was meant to be African. However, these have not focused, to a large extent, on the theme of the Circle's African origins. The authors of these works have, for the most part, only presented a brief history of the origins of the Circle, with particular reference to the period following its establishment in 1989. However, in this article, we will demonstrate that the founding of the Circle is relevant to Africa and – especially – that African women were already experiencing liberation before the inception of the Circle. Since this article falls within the field of historical theology, it will utilize the relevant analytical tools within this discipline. As a historical article with a feminist focus, it also draws on the theory of suspicion and interrogates women's and men's experiences in order to promote the article's aim of seeking liberation for women.

## 2. MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE'S LIBERATION

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's endeavour to restrict Circle theologies to those that fall within the realm of African culture and religion, was influenced by her life experiences. Mercy was born in Africa to African parents. Her mother and father were Ghanaians who fulfilled key roles in the church and in society. Mercy was also brought up in the context of African culture. She married a Nigerian, Modupe Oduyoye. Thus, her life has unfolded within the context of a bicultural orientation.

The roles of her mother, father and grandfather comprise part and parcel of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's African heritage. Her reflections on the limitations of culture in respect of the liberation of African women are based on her observations regarding these members of her immediate and extended family. This story of her family is recorded from a particular perspective, which focuses on how her family re-defined their culture in order to bring about the liberation of women. Her story, and also her mother's story, demonstrate how African women should re-define culture with a view to their own liberation. Furthermore, the stories of her father, husband and uncle reveal how men can promote the liberation of women through an enlightened understanding of masculinity.

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3 Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, founded in 1976 in Dar es Salaam.

## 2.1 Her Mother, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah

The story of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah demonstrates how being orphaned in Africa can potentially pose a threat to women's liberation. On the other hand, it also reveals how men can actually be instrumental in bringing about the necessary change for African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's mother, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah, would never have received even a primary education after being orphaned, if it had not been for her grandfather and her uncle. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's grandfather – her mother's father – died while her mother was very young. Hence, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's grandfather, J.E. Turkson of Asamankese, took care of her (Atta-Konadu 2002). Her father had died as a result of an accident that occurred while he was helping a friend to build a house in Abease, Ghana. Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's uncle placed her in a Wesleyan kindergarten at a very tender age; and she was cared for by Wesleyan deaconesses (sisters) (Atta-Konadu 2002). After completing kindergarten, she attended WeGeHe (The Wesleyan Girls' High School), which was renowned for its academic excellence. Hence, Mercy Amba Oduyoye's mother received an opportunity to be educated, despite being orphaned. In Africa, education for girls is not given priority over marriage. Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's experience therefore illustrates how men can, in fact, intervene in such cultures, in order to liberate women.

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's empowerment through education equipped her with the key to a meaningful engagement in the church and in society, as will be shown in the paragraphs that follow. In appreciation and acknowledgement of the roles fulfilled by her mother, Mercy Amba Oduyoye commemorated her mother's achievements after her death. At an opening ceremony of the Institute of Religion and Culture, held on the premises of the Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana in 2005, Mercy organized a special ceremony, which entailed the unveiling of an inscription dedicated to her mother. This practical step taken by Mercy Amba Oduyoye was aimed at honouring her mother as a model of African women who enjoyed liberation in the church and in society. Furthermore, her mother also represents those women who have fought for the liberation of other African women.

In addition to the unveiling of this inscription, Mercy Amba Oduyoye also used one of the rooms, for a limited period of time, to set up an exhibition of photographs depicting some memorable moments in her mother's life. The inscription clearly demonstrates that her mother was not merely relegated to the realm of domestic roles; she was an activist in the Methodist church, who worked hard to contribute to the liberation of women in her church. The inscription reads as follows:

The Hearth  
 To continue the ministry  
 of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah  
 1912-2005  
 Spouse of Charles Kwaw Yamoah  
 And mother to many  
 Unveiled by Mrs Sophia Duker

This inscription is located in the house that has served as a home to the Institute of Religion and Culture for some time. At a conference held in South Africa at Kempton Park, Mercy reported that Circle activities in Ghana are actually organized by the Institute. The placement of this inscription at the Institute clearly attests to the important role of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah in the establishment of the Circle. In a way, the purpose of the Circle is “to continue [her] ministry.” Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah serves as a model of women who have been liberated – and men have also played a part in this liberation.

The liberation of African women should not be restricted to the confines of the church. African women should also take up leadership roles in society. This view is also endorsed by the Circle. Furthermore, this notion was not unfamiliar to Mercy Amba Oduyoye when she was growing up, since her mother encouraged her children to take up leadership roles in society.

The role of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was not only evident in the church, but also in her dedication to her family. In the document entitled “Resolution” – which was signed by Mercy A. Oduyoye, Kojo Ewudzi, Essie T. Blay, Essie J. Cobbina and Joseph A. Yamoah on Saturday, June 4th, 2005 – one of the statements pertaining to Mercy Amba Oduyoye was that she was a dedicated mother to her family:

2 Corinthians 5:1 And whereas Mama was a dedicated mother to her children and her family – and whereas; (*sic*) she kept her family close to her heart.

Not only did she bestow love on her own children; she also extended her motherly care to others who were not her biological children. This is also confirmed in the Resolution:

and her love and compassion was to all humanity; and whereas, she became mother to many successful young men and women whom she raised like her own. (*sic*)

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah also positively promoted the taking up of leadership roles by women in society, by encouraging her own children to fulfil such roles. This is also confirmed in the Resolution. She had seven other

children in addition to Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Interestingly, all her children ultimately occupied key positions in the church and in society. This attests to her efficiency – as well as her husband's – in raising children. The following record of their careers serves as a confirmation in this regard:

Kojo Ewudzi Yamoah served in the Police Force of Ghana, helping to provide security to the people of that country. Her brother, Eggie Harris, became a doctor and served in the United States of America. Johnny B. Yamoah had been promoted to the post of Captain, at Ghana Airways. Mrs Essie F. Bobbina served on the Board of the Ghana Cocoa Industry. Prof. (Mrs) Essie T. Blay occupied the post of Professor of Agriculture at the University of Ghana. Sister Essie Ewusiwa Yamoah was formerly in the service of the Tema General Hospital in Ghana, while Sister Martha Yamoah was a member of the staff of the University of Ghana Hospital.

From the foregoing outline of the siblings' employment profiles, it is clear that Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was a woman who advocated gender equality. It was not only her sons who attained a high profile in the church and in society, but her daughters too. Her feminism was not aimed at denying male children an opportunity to develop their talents. This well-balanced approach to feminist theology is deeply ingrained in the ethos of the Circle.

The profile of Mama Mercy's children shows that she influenced them to be partakers in the social, economic, political and religious liberation of the people of Africa. She did not resemble the stereotypical missionaries who went around preaching, clutching their Bibles, without any real regard for issues pertaining to justice in society. She cultivated an awareness of these issues of justice on the part of her children. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's leadership in the Circle is therefore not an anomaly, viewed in the context of her family's achievements.<sup>4</sup>

The role of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah in establishing her children in leadership positions is also highlighted in the Resolution document:

and whereas she held a position of valor to defend her children and to safely situate them in lives dedicated to goodness and service to their communities. (*sic*)

Indeed, the extensiveness of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's achievements – along with her significant personal contribution to the church and to society – is deservedly pointed out in the Resolution:

And whereas; she was a lady of great character and a woman of high holy standards; and whereas, she was a woman of deep spiritual

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4 Details obtained from poster, Celebration of Life, 4.6.2005.

ambitions; and whereas, her message was universal ... in the loving memory of Mercy D. Yamoah. Blessed are the Dead which die in the Lord from henceforth; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, and their works do follow them. (Revelations 14:13.) For we know that if our earthly treasure house of this Tabernacle dissolves, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in heavens. (*sic*)

The life of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah comprises an example of how independence in a marriage relationship can contribute towards the elimination of gender inequalities in the church and in society. She was able to achieve great personal progress, and to further the progress of her own children, without any detrimental effects being suffered by her family. She went beyond the traditional, stereotypical roles of a wife and mother, and was also active in the church and in society, as reflected in this statement in the Resolution:

And whereas, she held her responsibilities as a leader and the spouse of the President of the Methodist Church of Ghana in highest esteem, she immersed herself during the era of "Mass education". (*sic*)

However, she carved out her own niche in life. Some of the areas in which she created her own space are highlighted in this quotation from the Resolution:

In the effort to spread literacy in the Gold Coast; her ground work resulted in the establishment of the "Women's Training Centre" at Kwadaso. She exhibited undying love for the women's fellowship of the Methodist Church of Ghana, being the founder of many. Be it therefore resolved, we accept death as the permissive will of Almighty God. And commend our family and friends to the loving care of Jesus Christ through His servants, the people of God. (*sic*)

Part of her reward for creating her own distinct role is the record of her name and achievements, which will be kept in the archives of the church, as stipulated in the Resolution:

and let it further be resolved that the copy of this resolution be entered into Mama's memorial and submitted for entry into the permanent records at the Methodist Church of Ghana. Done by the order of: The Children of the Rev Charles Kingsley and Mrs Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah (Oduyoye 2005b). (*sic*)

The kind of life orientation that was exemplified by Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah also forms part and parcel of the message of the Circle regarding the dignity of women and men in the context of marriage. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, as a founder of the Circle, has been able to acculturate such notions within the

Circle, without any difficulty. For Mercy Amba Oduyoye, her late mother is a prime example of an African woman who can fulfil leadership roles in the church and at home, in a manner that is not detrimental to men.

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah was a committed pastor's wife. In 1940, when her husband was posted to his first ministerial station in Achinacrom, near Ejiso in Ghana, she found no women's fellowship there. She promptly became the first person to initiate such women's fellowship circles in nearby places, such as Aslaninpon, Kwaso, Berposo and others (Atta-Konadu 2002). Again, when Mercy Amba Oduyoye's parents moved to Trinity College in Kumasi, her mother started a women's fellowship in Suame Pankromo, as well as in other villages (Atta-Konadu 2002).

But of all her mother's achievements, Mercy Amba Oduyoye considers the founding of the Kwadaso Women's Training Centre to be the most significant. Mercy Senior started this work in a bungalow at Affiduase, which was the home of a missionary, Miss White. The school targeted the wives of ministers, as well as women leaders of the church. This school was situated at some distance from Affiduase; but Mama Mercy made a plan to commute to the place, in order to teach there (Atta-Konadu 2002). This shows that Mercy Amba Oduyoye was already sensitized to the important role of women's groups in terms of the liberation of women in Africa. Thus, the writings produced by the Circle, right from the beginning, have included works on women's church groups as forums for women's liberation.

## 2.2 Her Father, the Very Rev. Charles Kwa Yamoah, B.D., London

Just as Mercy's mother was a role-model to her in some respects, her father helped to mould her character in other respects. He is an example of how an enlightened understanding of masculinity can bring liberation to women.

Rev. Charles Kwa Yamoah was a successful minister and theologian, as evidenced by the following comment in his tribute:

And by his lectures and sermons, he won [the] deep affection, admiration and respect of many students who became preachers of the gospel and teachers on our nation's educational system (Tribute 1987).

He had ample opportunity to oppress his wife. However, he chose instead to promote her in the church and in society. He had a correct understanding of the implications of being "head of the family". As a tutor at Trinity Theological College, and as Principal of Akropong Trinity College (Ashanti), he influenced the minds of many persons, enabling them to attain a better understanding



of God's work. He also lived out his teachings by maintaining an outstanding ministry, which even included becoming the president of the Methodist Church in Ghana. Evangelizing, pastoring and teaching formed the basis of his ministry. Apart from these occupations, he was also an expert organizer and a wise administrator. Above all, he was a man of God and a person of impeccable Christian character. He had an enlightened understanding of his wife's role as his partner. He allowed her to carve her own niche in the church – while he did the same.

It is reported that he had great personal charm. He was kind and generous to friends and colleagues. He had a great love for his Master, Jesus Christ. In one of his conversations, he had this to say:

In my funeral service[,] the less said about me[,] and the more about my [S]aviour, the better (Tribute 1987).

In all this, the important role fulfilled by Mercy's mother is clearly acknowledged – as can be seen, for example, in the following quotation:

Mrs Mercy Yamoah[,] a product of Wesley High School[,] has been most helpful to [her] husband[;] and during his years [at] Trinity [Theological College] and [his years of] travelling, [she has] always [been as] humble as a dove, giving as much help as any husband could ask ... (Tribute 1987).

Mercy's commitment to the work of her husband and the Lord was unswerving. An example in this regard can be found in this quotation:

Mercy had to undergo a minor operation. Before she regained consciousness, she started reciting certain passages from the prophet Ezekiel [on] which [her] husband was at that time teaching. Her mind was with her husband as he taught in the classroom as [a] trainer of ministers and school teachers (Tribute 1987).

It may thus be concluded that Mercy's ability to lead and inspire the Circle can also be partly attributed to the legacy of her father. His influence also constitutes a probable motivation for Mercy Amba Oduyoye's promotion of the use of scriptures in the construction of Circle theologies. Even though she has often been exposed to certain feminist movements that denigrate Scripture, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has consistently promoted reverence for the scriptures in Circle writings.

Rev. Charles Kwa Yamoah was born on 1st June 1905 and died on 12th January 1987. He was the third President of the "Conference" of the Methodist Church of Ghana, from 1973 to 1977. The responsibility for his funeral ceremony was assumed, for the most part, by the church, since Rev. Yamoah

had been a high-ranking leader in the Methodist Church. Rev. Charles Bakwa Yamoah was not only respected in the context of his own church tradition, but also in a broader context. This was evident at his “home-calling” service. Representatives sent by former students of WESCO organizations, for example, were also present.

The fact that Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s mother made a significant contribution to the church indicates that Mercy’s father did not take an oppressive stance by dissuading his wife from entering into a meaningful engagement in both the church and her home. Rather, he had a liberating understanding of masculinity. This interpretation of masculinity is also promoted in the Circle by Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

### 2.3 Her Husband, Modupe Oduyoye

From the very beginning of his relationship with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Modupe Oduyoye proved to be a person with a well-balanced outlook. For example, he never dissuaded Mercy from becoming involved in ecumenical bodies. He himself worked with ecumenical bodies that were affiliated to those in which Mercy Amba Oduyoye was involved. For instance, he worked with the All African Council of Churches, as well as the World Christian Students Federation. These organizations were associated with the World Council of Churches, where Mercy worked at the time of the Circle’s inception.<sup>5</sup>

When Mercy met Modupe in 1966, they were both actively involved in carrying out the Lord’s work in their respective countries: Modupe Oduyoye in Nigeria and Mercy Amba Oduyoye in Ghana. They both occupied key leadership positions in a Christian youth organization known as the Student Christian Federation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was the Treasurer of the Student Christian Federation of Ghana, while Modupe Dube was the General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement in Nigeria. Mercy and Modupe first met at the West African Student and Youth Christian Leadership Conference in Accra. Their second meeting occurred in Nigeria during the following month, September 1966.

Modupe was also a source of support to Mercy in the establishment of the Circle, as a result of his proficiency in writing and publishing, which comprise the main focus of the Circle. His talent in this regard provided a positive motivation for Mercy’s publishing work. Modupe’s key training pertains to languages. He is a polyglot – a master of many languages – including Arabic. This has enabled him to serve as a seasoned author and publisher, and his much-needed talents have been fruitfully deployed in order to fulfil the

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5 Modupe’s full name is Adedoyia Modupe Oduyoye.

Circle's objectives, which are passionately pursued by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. However, this does not imply that Modupe published Mercy Amba Oduyoye's books, or that without Modupe, Mercy Amba Oduyoye would not have engaged in publishing – as Carrie Pemberton alleges (Pemberton 2003:64).<sup>6</sup>

Apart from his skills in publishing, Modupe attended many ecumenical events, including the All Africa Christian Council (AACC) assemblies held in August 1969 in Abuja, and in August 1974 in Lusaka, as well as the 6th Assembly in Addis Ababa in September 1977. He also attended many conferences, such as that of the World Christian Students Federation in Argentina in August 1964, long before he met Mercy. In 1960, he attended a conference on missionary evangelism in Strasburg in France, and in the same year he also attended a World Christian Students Federation General Committee meeting. He attended the Quadrennial Conference of the World Christian Students Federation in Ohala, USA in December 1963.

Modupe Dube is also experienced with regard to issues of enculturation. While in Nigeria, he completed a one-month African Bible Translators' Course in 1967, when Mercy took up employment with the WCC in Geneva. This, too, could easily be construed as an indication that Mercy's focus on culture and religion was inspired by Modupe Dube. This is not a true reflection of the facts. Coincidences are a part of life. The fact of the matter is that Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Modupe Dube are highly compatible partners. Each of them – independently – had extensive experience of the Ecumenical world, long before Mercy was appointed by the WCC.

Apart from his prominent role in the AACC and the World Christian Students Committee, Modupe has been active in many other organizations. Between 1981 and 1984, he was a member of the UNESCO Committee that promoted "Access by Third World Countries to Foreign Copyright Works" (Dube 2005).

In the period between 2001 and 2005, he served on the standing committee of the WCC/Vatican study committee, dealing with "The contribution of Africa

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6 In fact, Circle books were given priority over the publication of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's own works. Carrie Pemberton underestimates Mercy Amba Oduyoye's abilities in the area of publishing. A perfunctory perusal of books and articles written by Mercy, which are acknowledged on a global basis, furnishes sufficient evidence to refute Ms Pemberton's remarks. Such remarks indirectly undermine the achievements of women who have performed well in professions which are similar to those of their husbands. Pemberton suggests that in such cases, the real work has actually been carried out by these women's husbands. If this is the case, then (according to the same logic), it must be assumed that Pemberton's book was written with much help from her husband – which may possibly explain why there are so many inaccuracies in the text!

and her Peoples to the Religious Heritage of the World". Modupe's extensive exposure to ecumenical contacts was useful to Mercy in her endeavour to establish the Circle.

### 3. THE CIRCLE AND THE ECUMENICAL ENVIRONMENT

Mercy Amba Oduyoye's exposure to the ecumenical environment also took place during her further training in theology abroad. Her studies at the University of Legon were completed in 1963; and during the same year, she proceeded with her postgraduate studies in Dogmatics at Cambridge University in Britain (Oduyoye 2003b). Here, too, non-traditional forms of theology had begun to develop. It was also around this time that there was a surge of liberation theologies in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Van den Bosch points out that

... [in] the struggle for liberation and freedom from patriarchy, hierarchy, sexism, racism and economic exploitation, the ecumenical movement named men and women equally as constituent members of the Church as the body of Christ and allowed women's issues a place in the ecumenical and theological agenda; the liberation movement helped expose the damage done by cultural, political and religious imperialism (Van den Bosch 2009:537).

However, even though such movements existed at the time, Mercy Amba Oduyoye noted that they did not tackle the fundamental issue of the marginalization of women. Thus, she organized the Circle to serve as a forum from which a theology of *women's* liberation could be articulated (Van den Bosch 2009).

#### 3.1 The Role of Letty Russell

Another source of exposure to global feminist theologies was provided through Letty Russell, who collaborated with the World Council of Churches in a study on "The Community of Women and Men in the Church" (Russell 1979). Letty

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7 Mercy Amba Oduyoye came from a privileged family – she was not the only member of her family who travelled abroad to further her studies. Such opportunities were a rare occurrence at that time. Her father had also studied for three years in England, ten years before she herself did so, in 1953. Her father carried out his further theological studies at Richmond College in London, where he received the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity. Mercy's mother accompanied him to London, and remained there with him during the period of his studies. Her father's theological career may also have been a contributing factor in Mercy's decision to study theology (Atta-Konadu 2002).

Russell was a Professor of Theology, and taught at the Pacific School of Religion and at the Yale Divinity College. Mercy Amba Oduyoye is not the only person who has been taught or assisted by Letty Russell. Many Circle women came into contact with Letty at the Yale Divinity College during the student exchange visits in which Circle women participated. Others met her during Circle conferences, or other ecumenical conferences and workshops. She died in 2007.

### 3.2 The Role of Brigalia Bam

Brigalia Bam, a South African, is one of the African women who played a key role in assisting Mercy Amba Oduyoye to found the Circle. (She was also a member of the International Planning Committee (IPC).) Mercy met Brigalia for the first time in 1967, when both women were working for the World Council of Churches. It was during this period that Mercy and Brigalia jointly conceived the idea of establishing the Circle. At the time, the WCC was also focusing on women's issues in different religious groups (Becher 1991). When Brigalia met Mercy, the latter was attending a programme on cooperation between men and women in the church. At that stage, Mercy had not yet begun to focus on women specifically – she had been working with the youth in the Youth Department of the WCC. Brigalia Bam, however, encouraged her to take the issues faced by women seriously. Brigalia pointed out the importance of realizing that, although men and women belonged to the same churches, women were faced with challenges that required special attention.

During the 1980s, Brigalia Bam served on a Board that was responsible for the coordination of a project focusing on the writing of feminist theologies by women authors. This awakened her interest in feminist theologies. However, to Brigalia's dismay, she noted that women from Africa were not participating in the relevant programmes. Women from Latin America and Asia took part, in addition to those from the West; but there were no participants from the African Continent (Oduyoye & Bam 2005). This induced Brigalia Bam and her colleagues to invite Mercy Amba Oduyoye to Harvard to become involved in this research. Mercy accepted the invitation to become involved in the writing of African women's theologies. According to Brigalia Bam, although feminist theologies abounded at that time, Mercy distinguished herself by retaining her identity as an African theologian, by writing a distinctly African theology. Mercy made it clear, in her writings and public discourses, that African women's theologies cannot be properly understood unless they are considered from the perspective of both culture and religion. This was a new stance in theological thinking amongst the women concerned, since many of them tended to write from the perspective of Western feminist theologies. This was during the 1980s, when feminists such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Rosemary

Radford Ruether were engaged in writing theologies. Letty Russell was also influential in the study of women's theologies at that time. Thus, Mercy was the first African woman theologian to create an African feminist theology – and Brigalia Bam was the first African woman to support her in this endeavour (Oduyoye & Bam, 2005). It is thus logical that Mercy Amba Oduyoye is regarded as the “mother” of the Circle. The model in terms of which Circle theologies are centred on the realm of religion and culture has been one of the main pillars of Circle theologies. Before establishing the Circle in 1989, Mercy Amba Oduyoye was already engaged in writing an African feminist theology. In 1985, for example, she wrote an article on “Women Theologians and the Early Church” (Oduyoye 1985), in which she pointed out that traditional church history excluded the experiences of women. By that time, Mercy was already familiar with the writings of feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose work she refers to in the above-mentioned article (Oduyoye 1985). Thus, the Circle is not the only mouthpiece that has contributed to the liberation of women in the church and in society. There are many others (such as the WCC and the First World Feminist Movements), of which only a few have been mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs. The struggle for the liberation of women is, after all, much older than the Circle.

### 3.3 The Role of the UN Decade for Women

It should also be noted that the Circle only came into being after the UN Decade for Women in the 1970s. This movement also made an impression on Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and may have intensified her aspiration to found the Circle. Thus, it can be said that the inception of the Circle was the fulfilment of an idea conceived by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Brigalia Bam, many years before the institution of the Circle became a reality. Although the 1970s comprised a period during which the focus fell on the articulation of women's voices through the UN Decade for Women, Mercy had already resolved, by that time, that she needed to do something for Africa, as a token of appreciation for the blessings that God had bestowed on her. She believed that all the good things that she enjoyed in life came from God. Brigalia Bam also reflected on the question of what one could do to show appreciation to God. Whereas Mercy Amba Oduyoye aspired to initiate something that would reach all Africa and involve women in theology, Brigalia Bam wished to establish an Institute (Oduyoye 2003a). It is interesting that Mercy Amba Oduyoye is a founder – and currently, Director – of the Institute for Religion and Culture. Brigalia Bam has been involved in training upcoming parliamentarians, and her main involvement is in the area of politics.

Another motivation that led Mercy Amba Oduyoye to start the Circle was her awareness of the fact that she was “one lone” woman in the theological

field, who found herself alone among men! Thus, she decided to establish a community of women in the context of theology. This decision comprised the embryonic stage of the Circle, encompassing a vision that already aspired towards the elimination of gender inequality. This envisioned goal would complement the efforts of other gender activist movements in the world. One of the ways in which Mercy Amba Oduyoye sought to bring about equality pertained to the issue of the equal representation of women theologians in relation to male theologians in Africa. Subsequently, the Circle has further developed this aspiration to promote the engagement of African women theologians in paid employment.

### 3.4 Finding Others: 1980-1987

Mercy's vision of establishing the Circle was only realized in the late 1980s, after a long process of entering into friendships with other African women (some of whom were not theologians). The list of founding members of the Circle (Kanyoro 2002) testifies to Mercy's efforts in this regard. However, even though the initiative to involve other women between 1980 and 1987 was Mercy's own project (Oduyoye 2003b), she knew that a spirit of collaboration amongst all those concerned was needed to establish the Circle.

Mercy was convinced that she needed the assistance of others to achieve her goal. This notion was typical of the Akan people (the ethnic group to which she belongs) – but it was also typically African, in a broader sense. According to an Akan proverb, it is not good to be a “lone star”. From the start, therefore, Mercy organized the Circle in collaboration with others. The first collaborative effort entailed finding others to join the Circle. Mercy was aware that she was the only African woman who was engaged in writing African feminist theology at that time; and this was the case for many years. This placed her in a dilemma as an Akan woman; and she was eager to change the situation. She knew that the only way to do so was to find other African women who could become involved in writing feminist theologies. Women were inadequately represented in print. This period is referred to by the Circle as the period of the “dearth of African women's theologies” (Kanyoro 2003). Mercy wanted to work with other African women theologians to rectify this situation.

According to an Akan proverb, a person who is unable to co-opt others on the road to the goal can be regarded as a fool. Mercy avoided “being a fool” by working hard to find other women to write theologies with her. In doing so, she has not only become “wise” as an Akan woman, but also as an African woman – because Africans believe the maxim that “I am because we are” (Oduyoye 2003a). Mercy diligently strove to find other women theologians by searching through theological colleges, seminaries and Departments of

Religious Studies in Africa. The *modus operandi* that was used in finding others entailed speaking to women about the Circle at conferences attended by women who were eligible for the task. In addition, letters were written to colleges, universities, and churches, requesting lists of the names of women who could become part of the envisaged network of the Circle.

### 3.5 The Role of the Institute of Church and Society

One of the first meetings during which Mercy started liaising with other African women theologians took place in Ibadan, Nigeria, while another was held in Port Harcourt in the same country. At these meetings, Mercy was able to establish ties with other African women theologians (Oduyoye 2003b). Through casual conversations at such meetings, she also made the acquaintance of African women abroad.

In 1980, Mercy succeeded in organizing the first meeting of African women theologians at the Institute of Church and Society in Ibadan (Oduyoye 2003a). In this endeavour, she was assisted by Isabella Johnstone, who operated the AACC women's desk, and Daisy Obi, who served on the Christian Council of Nigeria as a director of the Institute of Church and Society. This meeting was the result of an independent effort by Mercy. Dr Constance Parvey of the WCC, however, took advantage of the meeting, since he was looking for a venue to hold an All African Regional Conference of the WCC, concerning the study on "The Community of Men and Women in the Church," which was proposed at the fifth Assembly of the WCC (Kanyoro 2003). No papers for publication arose from this conference.

In practice – although Mercy's meeting was an independent effort, which was not linked to Dr Constance Parvey's endeavour – the meeting that resulted was well-coordinated as a joint WCC effort. After the All African Regional Conference of the WCC had run its course, Mercy Amba Oduyoye – with the assistance of Daisy Obi, a Nigerian, and Isabella Johnstone, a Sierra Leonean – proceeded to hold the women theologians' meeting; but the idea of the Circle was not brought up for discussion at that stage.

### 3.6 The Role of the Programme for Theological Education (PTE)

The first formal discussion on the possibility of an Africa-wide Circle of women theologians took place at a PTE meeting in Accra, Ghana. John Pobee organized the meeting. It was during this meeting that Mercy Amba Oduyoye called the women together, outside of the conference programme, and shared with them her vision to start the Circle. At that conference, there



were more than ten women who were interested in joining EATWOT; but it was not possible for all of them to do so, because EATWOT worked according to quotas. Mercy took this opportunity to challenge the women by pointing out that it was necessary to start a Circle, which would be their own women's forum. This would allow many more African women theologians to become involved and associate with other women theologians. The women accepted Mercy's challenge with much enthusiasm (Oduyoye 2003b).

In 1987, after Mercy had completed her teaching contract with the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, she accepted the post of Deputy General Secretary of the WCC. By that time, the vision of the Circle had taken root and attracted widespread support. Mercy's appointment entailed working in the Programme Unit for Education and Renewal. She was even able to lobby for support in some of the departments of the WCC with regard to the establishment of the Circle (Kanyoro 2002; Oduyoye 2003a). At that time, Brigalia Bam was still in Geneva. In 1988, Mercy began to search for funds in order to hold the first Circle meeting. She was subsequently able to assemble the first group of African Women Theologians, who became the "birth attendants" of the Circle that was officially established in 1989.

In August 1988, the first members of the Circle, who are regarded as its founders, met in Geneva at the invitation of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. These women formed the International Planning Committee (IPC). At that time, Mercy was living in Geneva and working for the WCC. All the invited women were members of EATWOT, and included a high proportion of academics who were teaching in a University. Being part of EATWOT had exposed them to feminist theologies in the Third World. However, they were also familiar with feminist theologies of the First World, owing to their theological education. This placed them in an advantageous position by equipping them to lead the movement of African feminism in Africa. Thus, the Circle was finally launched in Ghana in 1989.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye refers to Circle theology as an "irruption within an irruption" (Fabella & Torres 1993), owing to the fact that, when she established the Circle, she belonged to EATWOT, which is also involved in developing theologies of Africa. (Mercy had joined EATWOT in 1976 – the first African woman to do so. At that stage, she was not yet working for the WCC, but was a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. In the same year, Brigalia Bam held a conference of women seminarians.) Mercy Amba Oduyoye was elected as President of EATWOT in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

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8 In this regard, Carrie Pemberton erroneously states that Mercy was the General Secretary of EATWOT (Pemberton 2003:61).

## 4. CONCLUSION

The Circle was largely conceived as African. Its focus on themes of women's liberation is consistent with African culture. Although the reflections in this article on African women's liberation are based on the individual experiences of Mercy Amba Oduyoye and her family, these experiences amply demonstrate that the liberation of African women takes place, for the most part, without the influence (or assistance) of the West. It is therefore inaccurate to suggest that the Circle is Western in its orientation, and that it only tackles issues that are relevant to the West. Mercy Amba Oduyoye was informed by the African context regarding what was possible, as well as what was already being done, in Africa. This is why, even though ecumenical bodies admittedly comprised the avenues within which the Circle was conceived, Mercy Amba Oduyoye primed Circle theologians to research and write African feminist theologies within the realm of religion and African culture.

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