

MERCY AMBA EWUDZIWA ODUYOYE: MOTHER OF OUR STORIES

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Abstract

Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1933-) is Africa's first and foremost woman theologian. While her life reads like a story, Oduyoye's theology itself can best be described as a theology of stories that have changed worldviews on gender, ecumenism and restorative historiography. This article deals with these three themes in Oduyoye's work, and how she has journeyed with them through the three main periods of her life.

At the beginning of her teaching career, during the 1970s, she taught students the history of dogma as people's stories of their struggle to understand the divine. In the 1990s and at the height of her career as Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, we find her deconstructing the mythical stories of both the African and Judaeo-Christian traditions in order to retell these stories as healing stories to African women. And now, more than a decade after she retired from institutionalised labour, Oduyoye is still contributing prolifically to re-telling the stories of Africa as stories in which women are worthy human beings, and the African church is one with, and in, its cultural history. Indeed, hers is a life committed to the theological significance of stories, and to the power of stories to heal and to unite.

1 AIM AND METHOD

The aim of this article is to tell the story of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b 21st October 1933),ⁱ and her engagement with stories, in the three phases of development that characterise her life. These phases encompass firstly a period of classical training and teaching, stretching over a period of roughly 20 years (1953-1973). A second period of 20 years (1974-1994) testifies to her critical and analytical reflection on patriarchal cultures and practices and their influence on church women's lives. A third period starts with the publication of *Daughters of Anowa* in 1995 and the shift from the woman theologian as social critic to the woman theologian as society's healer.

In terms of method I have centred the article around three themes. These themes are: gender, ecumenism and restorative historiography. They are chosen as themes because they present themselves "blatantly" in Oduyoye's publications. Choosing them is furthermore supported by my own experience of Oduyoye's work within the Circle of Concerned African Women

Theologians, of which I have been a member since 1989. I also interviewed Oduyoye (1998) at a meeting of the World Council of Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe. From this interview much of the personal information on her younger years ensued. This article was written for a *Festschrift* that was to appear in 1998 in the United States of America to celebrate Oduyoye's 65th anniversary. The *Festschrift* never materialised, although two subsequent publications were dedicated to Oduyoye (see Pui-lan, 2004, and Russell, 2006). I have, therefore, reworked this article, adding to it analyses of Oduyoye's main publications that have appeared during the last 10 years. This article, then, is published in anticipation of Oduyoye's 75th birthday anniversary in 2008.

2 THE FIRST PHASE: TRAINING AND TEACHING (1953-1973)

After she completed her secondary school education at the Achimota School in Accra in 1952, Mercy Amba Yamoah underwent two years of teacher training at the University of Kumasi, and spent the next 20 years as a teacher at secondary schools in Ghana and Nigeria. During this period the three themes that would dominate her later life as theologian were already emerging:

2.1 Gender

As a secondary school teacher, Oduyoye published two books, *Youth without jobs* (1972) and *Flight from the farm* (1973). Although these two books were not academic in nature and her ideas were expressed in cartoons, Oduyoye was already showing her sensitivity to the contexts in which she lived, which at the time were the life worlds of the young people of West Africa. And although young boys played the main parts in the books, Oduyoye (2004:xii) has testified that even then she was thinking "about the education of girls, teenage pregnancy, early marriages, rumours of abortions and occasional drop-outs for no apparent reason" (Oduyoye 2004).

2.2 Re-storying history

During this period, in the 1960s, Oduyoye interrupted her career as a teacher to undertake graduate studies in religion, first at the University of Ghana (1959-1963) and then at the University of Cambridge (1963-1965).

It was during her studies at these two universities that she was influenced towards the de-dogmatising and re-storying of Christian beliefs. At the University of Ghana Noel King, church historian turned historian of religions, taught her that "theology was something you struggle to do - not something you receive" (Oduyoye, interview 1998). And at the University of Cambridge Maurice Wiles brought this truth to her attention: doctrines are not from heaven; they are crafted out, by struggling human beings, to feed their spirituality. It was this insight which eventually led Oduyoye to believe that stories, as human constructs of experience, are the places where doctrine and life meet.

2.3 Ecumenism

Oduyoye has been a practicing Methodist all her life; her father, Charles Kwaw Yamoah, was a Methodist minister. However, already as a secondary school pupil at Achimota School (Accra, Ghana), Oduyoye became comfortable with ecumenical ways of worshipping, rudiments of ecumenism that were later strengthened at Cambridge University with her joining the Students Christian Movement. "It was SCM connections that got me to Geneva (*as Deputy General Secretary of the WCC*) and SCM formed Modupe Oduyoye, the Nigerian SCM General Secretary, who became my spouse", she later wrote (Oduyoye 2004:xii).

Her passion for ecumenism in Africa also fed the other two themes in her work. In the first place, it led to her founding the ecumenical "Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" in 1987 as a space for African women theologians of all denominations, and eventually all religions, to express their thoughts academically. Secondly, it led to numerous publications from her pen re-storying the history of religion in Africa as one of ecumenical co-operation, her latest contribution to *A history of the ecumenical movement 1968-2000* (Oduyoye 2004a) crowning three decades of her own scholarship.

At the end of this period in her life, that is, at the end of her career as a secondary school teacher, Oduyoye was 30 years old. During this period she had published only two cartoon books. It was during the next period that Oduyoye was to emerge as a prolific writer and a social critic of growing influence.

3 THE SECOND PHASE: CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL REFLECTION (1974-1994)

In September 1974 Mercy Amba Oduyoye commenced her career as a university lecturer when she was appointed in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. This career was interrupted 13 years later, in 1987, when Oduyoye took up the post of Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. She remained in the latter position until 1994, when she resumed her lecturing career on a freelance basis. She is presently teaching at Trinity Theological College in Accra, Ghana, which, because of her doing, is now specialising in theological education for women.

Two-thirds of the 20 year period dealt with in this section (1974-1994) thus consists of Oduyoye lecturing in West Africa at tertiary level (1974-1987), and one-third in an executive position at the World Council of Churches in Geneva (1987-1994). During this time, Oduyoye focussed her stories on the three themes already mentioned, namely the rewriting of African religious history, the need for ecumenism, and the empowerment of women. Her insights into these themes commenced in West Africa and were vigorously pursued in writing in Geneva.

3.1 Rewriting African religious history

In December 1977 the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians was held in Ghana. Oduyoye delivered a paper at this conference entitled "The value of African religious beliefs and practices for Christian theology" (Oduyoye 1979). In this paper she identified points of contact between African Traditional Religions and Christian Theology. Since Oduyoye's historiography, and her subsequent use of stories, is basically concerned with the Christian presence in an African environment, note should be taken of the presuppositions for their coexistence and mutual influencing suggested by Oduyoye at a relatively early date in her academic career. Both African and Christian myths of origin, she says, affirm that God is the Creator of the world and that God has appointed humankind to be its steward. The myths of both these beliefs furthermore acknowledge God as the Originator of all humanity, so that past, present and future generations form one community – of which women are an integral part.

In short, in 1977 Oduyoye believed that African Traditional Religions and Christianity shared views on the wholeness of humanity during a mythical past, and that they should share more of each other's heritage in future for humanity to move towards greater reconciliation. In all this Oduyoye emphasised her own position within Christianity, seeing Christianity as a legitimate development on African soil.

It is this ideal – Christianity interacting with the African past, both with the mythical concepts they have in common and with the histories they have not (yet) shared – that Oduyoye endeavoured to realise in the mission histories she wrote during the time she lectured in Nigeria. In *The Wesleyan presence in Nigeria* and in *Leadership development in the Methodist church, Nigeria, 1842-1962*,ⁱⁱ Oduyoye tells the story of Christian (Protestant) missions in Nigeria as one of constant interaction with African culture. Not only does she emphasise the African identity of this movement, which took its inception from black missionaries, she also tells the story of ecumenical sharing in church-building in Nigeria, giving full scope to women's participation in this process. In this way she roots the ideal of wholeness in the story of Nigerian Christianity in very much the same way in which she envisaged the rewriting of African religious history in 1977.

3.2 Ecumenism

In 1982 Oduyoye published an article in *Voices of unity* which consisted of essays in honour of WA Visser't Hooft, then General Secretary of the World Council of Churches since 1972. In this article she tells the story of "A decade and a half of ecumenism in Africa" (Oduyoye 1982), remaining true to her initial claim that Africa at heart yearns and aims towards wholeness and unity. She argues that history testifies to this fact and that Western ecumenism is liberal lip-service by white mission churches who, after all, send endless personnel to Africa to uphold their distinctive positions as churches, while the Africans themselves have no problems in participating in ecumenical services and ministries. She also points to fundamentalism ("conservative evangelism") as one of the ways in which preachers from abroad force Africans into exclusivist church-formation.

3.3 Women

Since the early 1980s Oduyoye has published abundantly on women's issues. As far as the previous themes of rewriting African religious history and ecumenism are concerned, Oduyoye has managed to uphold the ideal of African wholeness and has successfully defended it against Western fragmentation and individualism. However, on the issue of women and their liberation, Oduyoye remains critical of African society, both past and present. In a paper entitled "Reflections from a third world women's perspective: Women's experience and liberation theologies", delivered at the Fifth International Conference of EATWOT in 1981, Oduyoye, while still honouring the views of African myths on human wholeness, became extremely critical of the ability of these myths to integrate women in a liberative way into this wholeness of life. Her point of departure is this story from West Africa (Oduyoye 1983:246):

Once there lived on earth Half and Half, each of them only half a human being. They spent all their time quarrelling and fighting, disturbing the rest of the village and trampling upon the crops. Every time a fight began cries went up to Ananse Kokroko: Fa ne Fa reko o! "They are at it again, Half and Half are fighting." So one day God came down, brought Half and Half together, and a whole human being appeared.

The story illustrates Oduyoye's view of male and female relationships at the time: while the (African) ideal of unity exists also as far as women and men are concerned, in reality it is a false unity at the expense of both parties. Domestic and economic violence against women creates a traditionally acceptable but detrimental peace for both the oppressor and the oppressed. Oduyoye then recommended a theology of relationships which would open up new horizons to both men and women to live their humanity to the full.

1986 proved to be an eventful one for Oduyoye. She concluded her lecturing career in Nigeria, and spent time studying and teaching in the United States of America, at Harvard Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary in New York. This was the year before she joined the WCC as its General Deputy Secretary.

It was also the year in which her book, *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Oduyoye 1986) was published. One chapter of this book is dedicated to feminism. However, it seems that Oduyoye was influenced at this time by American feminism's criticism of culture and church to such an extent that she handled the topic of feminism solely from this perspective without reference to the mythical wholeness of Africa. But this was soon to change.

At the end of the same year, in December 1986, Oduyoye delivered a paper with Elizabeth Amoah (from Ghana) at an EATWOT conference entitled "The Christ for African women". In this essay Oduyoye demythologises the historical and dogmatic singularity of (the male) Christ and finds Christ-like women amongst both mythical African and Christian African women. She finds Christ himself in the everyday experiences of the women of Africa, that is, in

African women creating wholeness amidst burdens and suffering (Oduyoye 1988:35):

Having accepted Christ as refugee and guest of Africa, the woman seeks to make Christ at home and to order life in such a way as to enable the whole household to feel at home with Christ. The woman sees the whole space of Africa as a realm to be ordered, as a place where Christ has truly “tabernacled.” Fears are not swept under the beds and mats but are brought out to be dealt with by the presence of the Christ. Christ becomes truly friend and companion, liberating women from assumptions of patriarchal societies, and honouring, accepting, and sanctifying the single life as well as the married life, parenthood as well as the absence of progeny. The Christ of the women of Africa upholds not only motherhood, but all who, like Jesus of Nazareth, perform “mothering” roles of bringing out the best in all around them. This is the Christ, high priest, advocate, and just judge in whose kingdom we pray to be.

A Christ-like woman, according to Oduyoye (and Amoah), is one sent by God to suffer on behalf of the destitute but who does not, however, accept deprivations as the destiny of humanity. Taking on a “mothering” role, the Christ-like African woman heals society through listening, caring and telling stories of hope and paradise.

In 1987 Mercy Amba Oduyoye became the first black (and only the second African)ⁱⁱⁱ woman to become Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. One of her main achievements during this period was to institutionalise and structure the voices of African women theologians, resulting in the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. This, in turn, resulted in a charming looking book in strong colours, *The will to arise: Women, tradition and the Church in Africa*, published in 1992 as the first in a series of publications by members of the Circle (see Oduyoye 1992b).

In this book, Oduyoye published an article entitled “Women and ritual in Africa”. She finds that traditional African rituals pertaining to birth, puberty and marriage curb women’s sexuality and are meant to direct women’s biological potency and energy towards male needs. She therefore encourages both African Traditional Religions and Christianity to rethink and re-“ritualise” women’s sexuality, with insights from women’s religious experiences, for women to be able to feel both “holy” and “whole” in practising their sexuality. She concludes with these powerful words in which women’s holiness is directly linked to their wholeness as human beings in a liberative and creative way (Oduyoye 1992b:9):

Women are persons-in-communion, not persons who “complete” the other ... We may need to reorient our thinking so that we see communion as a relationship devoid of hierarchical relations and power-seeking. When we have learned more about our humanity perhaps we will also be able to understand what God is telling us about divinity.

In summary, then, for Oduyoye the second period of 20 years after she entered the world of tertiary learning is a period in which she developed and explicated her socio-critical skills on three subjects, which were, as mentioned, rewriting history, revisualising ecumenism and reviving women. Her criticism of church and society on these issues follows two directions. On the one hand, she accuses Western role players of following false alternatives in both historiography and ecumenicity by ignoring the idea of unity and wholeness which has blossomed in African story-telling since mythical times. On the other hand she fearlessly retrieves and fiercely attacks the patriarchy inherent in African traditions. During this period she starts presenting healing solutions to the problems of Westernism and African patriarchy.

However, this period is mainly one of putting words to problems; the healing words would follow in the next period of her life, a period highlighted by two main events, namely the publication of her book *Daughters of Anowa* in 1995, and her appointment as director of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological College in Accra, Ghana, in 1998.

4 THE THIRD PHASE: THE HEALING OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY (1995-)

4.1 Healing the daughters of Africa

Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy is one of Oduyoye's major works. It is indeed her major work as an historian, in which she retrieves sources from an African heritage to place African religious historiography on track, after it has been taken on a detour by Western historiographical norms and sources. She identifies norms in Ghanaian and Nigerian myths and uses them as a point of departure for finding values for the Christian future in Africa. She does not suggest that there is an historical link between the African mythical past and Christianity, although she states that African myths do bind African Christians to a common past (Oduyoye 1995:14). The true link between African Christians and traditional African myths lies in the values of humanness portrayed in African myths with which, according to Oduyoye, African Christians should identify.

Using African myths as a point of departure for a Christian perspective on church and society allows Oduyoye to keep Westerners at bay, while empowering African Christians to identify with the traditionally African values which affirm the wholeness of human life. Having assumed an African identity through a common mythical past, Oduyoye furthermore allows herself to criticise patriarchal ideologies in myths, while at the same time opening these myths up to deliver messages of healing. While pointing to African women as "victims of a culture whose life-giving aspects they seek to protect" (Oduyoye 1995:15), she empowers and heals them with the image of African women in the myths who "stretched their hands to the global sisterhood of life-loving women" (Oduyoye 1995:2). Oduyoye points to the presence of a Creator Goddess in African myths, and the absence of an Eve-like figure who, in Christian myths, represents fallen womanhood. Both these concepts are used

by Oduyoye as a means of healing African Christian women from their religiously battered past.

Oduyoye as critic has become Oduyoye the healer.

While Oduyoye still uses sharp language to address issues such as “cultural sexism” (Oduyoye 1995:159) and “sacralizing the marginalization of women’s experience” (Oduyoye 1995:175), a strong urge to lead society towards healing, healthy change and communion between sexes dawns in the book, as is displayed in this concluding myth which is a recreation of the creation stories of both the Judaeo-Christian and the African traditionalist traditions (Oduyoye 1995:218):

And it came to pass in those days that a boy of six years sat with his mother, munching the bread she had baked, and watching her knead the dough for the bread he would eat in the evening.

“Mother,” said he, “where does the grain come from?”

Mother (wiping the sweat off her forehead with the back of her left hand), “The Earth grew it.”

“And who made the Earth?”

“Aha,” said the Mother, “that is a long story. Two gods were having a wrestling match; one was female, the other male. When the male god saw he could not win, he abandoned the rules of the game, picked up a machete, and hacked the body of the female god in two, and he put half up to make the sky and half down to make the earth. Quickly he went up, made peace with the upper half, and from there tried to control the lower half.”

“But,” began the son.

“No buts,” said the mother. “I shall not continue the story until you wake your sister up and bring her here.”

So off went the boy who soon returned arm in arm with his twin sister. They were the Male and Female. The mother put them to work sifting flour for the third round of baking, which would be tomorrow’s bread.

When he becomes a Father and she a Mother, perhaps they will have a new myth for their new age.

Myth, history, and faith agree: people can change.

4.2 Subsequent publications

4.2.1 Overview

In the years since her retirement from the WCC in 1994 at the age of 60, Oduyoye has pursued her ideal of rewriting African religious history, exchanging a colonialist perspective for one that honours African initiatives. She furthermore continuously uses history, mythical history and proverbs, in a story-telling manner, as intertexts to explain her ideals of healing African society.

All three of the themes in Oduyoye's work are well represented in this post-retirement period: entitling women, re-storying history, establishing ecumenism. The latter theme is magnificently realised in her editorship of and contribution to the third volume of *A history of the ecumenical movement: 1968-2000* that was published by the World Council of Churches in 2004 (Oduyoye 2004a). In the remaining pages of this article I am going to concentrate on her work on women, their history and their future in the years after her retirement in 1994. Most of her work during this time centers around EATWOT and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Also, because of growing international recognition, Oduyoye is publishing lavishly in American and European feminist anthologies.

4.2.2 Women

4.2.2.1 EATWOT

In December 1994 EATWOT went into dialogue with women theologians on the topic of violence against women at a conference in San Jose, Costa Rica. The title of Oduyoye's talk was "Violence against women: window on Africa" (Oduyoye 1995a). The paper deals with the topic in a healing manner, using three steps. First she identifies the "factors of control, exploitation and dehumanisation noted in African proverbs such as "Woman is like the earth; everyone sits down on her" and "He who is not smart in speech and argument should not take a talkative wife", suggesting that the verbal abuse apparent in these proverbs points to, and even legitimates, physical violence against women in public and private life. Secondly Oduyoye uses this same technique of demythologising mythical history and exposing its sexist orientation on both Christian mythical texts and church theology, indicating that both the traditionalist and the Christian approach to women are out of touch with women's experience of and longing for wholeness. In the third place Oduyoye offers a healing solution to the situation, which is education. Girls should be educated to develop a feminist consciousness and boys "to learn that gender is not a valid basis for ranking".

In her keynote address to EATWOT in January 1996 in New York, Oduyoye (1996) offered another means of healing to her listeners, apart from that of education. This is cross-gender dialogue. She suggested the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as a forum for such a dialogue.

4.2.2.2 Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

In 1997 this Circle held a Pan-African conference in Nairobi, Kenya. At this point the Circle had not yet established itself as a forum for cross-gender dialogue and it was on the issue of education that Oduyoye addressed the Circle. Oduyoye visited nine theological seminaries in Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and Cameroun during 1996 and this paper was a report on her findings. She found that women were participating in theological education at these seminaries, but that the contents of the courses were not addressing women's concerns and experiences. Women students were scarce since churches were not willing to sponsor them. Graduate scholarships for women were rare. Oduyoye then called on the Circle to engage affirmatively in

women's theological education as a means of healing not only women, but society as a whole.

Actually, cross-gender dialogue never became a focus point of the Circle. During the 1990s the Circle concentrated on women's place in the "household of God" (see Kanyoro & Njoroge 1996; Oduyoye 1997). How are women to be exposed to education, and especially theological education? How are they to achieve access to authority and power, especially in the church/faith community? And when they have been educated equally with men, and when they have acquired authority and power, how are they – as women of faith – to use these things so as not to become oppressive themselves? How are Scripture and culture to be reinterpreted to support women in their quest for equality and human dignity? These were the questions dominating the biennial meetings of the Circle during the 1990s.

In the 2000s the focus of the Circle shifted, in a time of HIV/Aids, to women's health issues. Yet, in my opinion, the basis for making women of faith strong in the face of this pandemic was laid during the 1990s by Oduyoye's theology of "transforming power", a theology that empowered women in the household of God on their earthly journey. In her paper given at the 1995 conference of the Circle that dealt with "Transforming power: Women in the household of God", Oduyoye gives the most powerful definition of power ever: "Power is for the well-being of the community" (Oduyoye 2001:223). With this simple definition she distributed power equally amongst men and women, rich and poor, the politically powerful and the economically disadvantaged – for the common goal of protecting the health of everybody in the community.

4.2.2.3 American/European feminist publications

Women theologians around the world know that both academia and faith communities expect them to be experts in all fields of theology. Oduyoye, too, is expected to give voice to African women's theologies on a variety of subjects, and in a variety of publications. In the past 15 years we find Oduyoye contributing on all possible aspects of theology in anthologies of American (e.g. Thistlethwaite & Engel 1990) and European (e.g. Parsons 2001) feminists.

Most important in Oduyoye's recent efforts to establish African women's theologies at the core of women's theologies worldwide is the publication of her book *Introducing African Women's Theology* as the sixth in the series of "Introducing Feminist Theology" published by Sheffield Academic Press in England (Oduyoye 2001a). Her life of theological story-telling is summarised well when she introduces her readership to the method of African women's theology: "... African women accept story as a source of theology and so tell their own stories as well as study the experiences of other women including those outside their own continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten" (Oduyoye 2001a:10). Oduyoye then explains in the rest of the book how stories informed African women in reading the Bible from the perspective of cultural hermeneutics, in interpreting the multireligious and multicultural contexts in which they are living from the perspective of inter-relatedness, in developing compassion and solidarity amongst women in their

struggle for human dignity, in finding ways to live God-centred and Jesus-like for the improvement of society, and in practicing and finding hospitality in the household of God.

5 CONCLUSION

Fifteen years ago, third world women theologians, including myself, were forced to use the work of first world feminist theologians as their intertexts and points of departure, simply because we ourselves had not identified the sources for third world women's theologies clearly. Oduyoye has, since then, brought us back to our sources. She presents in her work African myths and proverbs as legitimate sources for a women's theology. As positive sources these myths and proverbs point to wholeness as a basis for a woman-friendly anthropology. However, Oduyoye also uses the negative references to women in these sources as a basis for identifying patriarchy, and for demobilising and desacralising it, especially in its cultural context.

During her life, Oduyoye has placed at least seven points on the agenda of African women theologians. These are

- an intensified struggle against fundamentalist and anti-women usages of the Bible;
- the refinement of cultural hermeneutics, that is, the rereading of Biblical and historical texts with a focus on their cultural biases;
- the enhancement of theological education and ministerial formation amongst women;
- the retrieving of women's stories on their involvement in church and society;
- the instigation of cross-gender discussions;
- the accommodation of African women's theologies at the heart of women's theologies globally; and
- vigorous efforts, academically and practically, to enhance women's health and power in the face of the HIV/Aids pandemic.

Oduyoye has already contributed extensively to these issues, leading the process of identifying them and planning to extend their boundaries in future.

- Against Biblical fundamentalism she has introduced a method of retelling and de-dogmatising Christian mythology to accommodate women's needs and experience, a method similar to the one she used on African myths.
- As far as cultural hermeneutics are concerned, Oduyoye has led the way in deconstructing cultural sexism and constructing healing stories based on cultural heritages using African and Christian mythology as her sources.
- Furthermore, women's participation in theological education and in ministry has been a major topic in her work and she plans in the near future to publish women's sermons, no doubt under the title "The sermon as story".

- Retrieving and publishing women's stories on their contribution to society as religious people is also on her agenda, and special focus is currently given to women in the African Indigenous Churches.
- Oduyoye is also working on her as yet not realised dream of cross-gender dialogue, and expanding this vision through the Circle to a cross-religious dialogue.
- Through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and their publications, Oduyoye has been working tirelessly to establish African Women's Theology as an academic discipline, worthy of its place amongst other theological disciplines worldwide.
- Finally, Oduyoye has engaged African women in the struggle for their health, and the right to take control over their bodies.

"What is the future of women with no paradise behind them?", I heard her asking once. Mercy Amba Oduyoye has taken up the challenge of answering this question by reconstructing the stories of Africa's mythical pasts for a healed future of wholeness for both men and women.

And indeed, in one of her latest publications, *A Letter to My Ancestors*, she makes the following promise: "We vow to you and to ourselves before this great cloud of global witnesses, seen and unseen. Never again shall we walk on tiptoe around the globe which is God's world and our common heritage" (Oduyoye 2005:xxii).

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 In a letter of December 1998 to myself, Mercy Amba Oduyoye confirmed that her birth date is 21 October 1933, but that, "through some inscrutable mistake in 1949 all my official documents bear 21st October 1934".
 - 2 Both works were published in 1992 by Sefer, Ibadan, while Oduyoye was at the WCC. However the research done for these books and the bulk of the writing was done during her lecturing years in Nigeria.
 - 3 The first African woman was Marie Assaad of the Coptic Church, Egypt.