

I N T R O D U C I N G

**AFRICAN
WOMEN'S
THEOLOGY**

Mercy Amba Oduyoye



**I N T R O D U C T I O N S I N
F E M I N I S T T H E O L O G Y**

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African women's theology is firmly lodged in the God of life, whose end is to defeat death and enthrone life forever. It is for this reason that most of the statements about God in this theology are made in the context of liberation and transformation.

African women who read the Bible with a critical eye discover in it the Triune God as liberator of the oppressed, the rescuer of the marginalized and all who live daily in the throes of pain, uncertainty and deprivation. Added to this is the fact that in African Religion, God is always present in human affairs, as in the rest of creation, as judge, healer and the one who takes the side of the weak and the vulnerable, as in the affirmation 'God drives the flies off the body of the tail-less animal'. With the collaborative evidence from biblical stories, women in theology have appropriated a liberation motif together with the 'image of God' motif to stake a claim to freedom from oppression, to full humanity and full membership in the 'household of God' and a place in 'the great economy of God', in which all are worthy. They hold on to the faith that Yahweh is the God of the oppressed who are to live as God's people, and claim the power of God that accords with the situation from which they need to be liberated. God is adequate for all occasions and against holding creation in bondage.

God plays the part of kin, a member of the community and reclaims what has been lost and takes care of orphans and widows. As many women often feel themselves in bondage or lost in the 'foreign lands' of final communities, the theologians see the acts of God in the Hebrew culture portrayed in the Book of Ruth as illustrative of the kinship role of God. The saving acts of God in African Religion and in the Hebrew Bible are often worked into those of God in Christ in the Greek Testament and into the anthropology, for nobody is a nobody, all being people of God. Therefore without God all is naught and one can use the Akan symbol *Gye Nyame* as the central motif for African women's theology.

Chapter Four

Jesus the Divine-Human: Christology

The word 'Christology' is not in the vocabulary of African Christian women unless they have had some formal theological education; but they all talk about Jesus, believe in Jesus, relate closely to Jesus the son of Mary and testify to what Jesus has done for them. The story that characterizes African women's Christology is not the meaning of the incarnation, nor the annunciation, the meeting of Mary and the angel, but what is usually referred to as 'the visitation'—the episode in which Mary visited Elizabeth in the anonymous Judean town in the hill country. Childbearing is central to African women's self-image, and the scene of the two women swapping pregnancy announcements is a precious one for African women. That the younger woman paid a visit to the older one to share her strange experience signifies for them the solidarity that women crave in times of crisis and in other significant moments of their lives. In this case they shared their common experience of uncommon conception. Their expected births were due to special divine intervention, just what African women pray for in their dread of the reproach that accompanies childlessness. Together, they rejoiced at God's salvation, which comes through women. As unborn speaks to unborn, God's future as discerned by women is made ready by women to be communicated among and by women to the whole community.

In this study the primary sources are my own 'christological journey', that of Bette Ekeya and the reflections of Anne Nasimiyu on women's stories of 'meetings' with Jesus. These will be augmented with statements from several other women. It will be like Mary and Elizabeth sharing stories of salvation, for in general, African theology tends to treat Christology from the stand point of soteriology. It is what responds to the quest for life and more life that African Religion pursues.

Amba's Story

Christology is a familiar word among Christian theologians and one that is quite able to stand by itself and be explicated as a theological issue and concept. What have women got to do with the concept of Christology? What do women say about Christology? Is there such a thing as women's Christology? Do the traditional statements of Christology take into account women's experiences of life? These and many others are the questions that led me to re-read the Christology I had studied and to reflect on what I had heard from pulpits. In this process of reviewing what I knew, I heard Jesus say to me, 'And you, who do you say that I am? And why are you using this technical word when it is me, Jesus of Nazareth, you encounter?'

So then, I looked again at the word *Christology*. I can recognize the word 'Christ'; The '-ology' bit comes as the second half of many long words and means the 'study of', coming from the Greek word *logos* (word or reason). Hence one could describe Christology simply as a reasoned account of what the word Christ stands for. Christology then is the church's word about The Christ. The question asked by Jesus does not go away. What do I say about The Christ? To answer this I go back to what has been said by the Church but especially to the fundamental beliefs that have led to those statements. So first I will take a brief excursus into Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek Bible, called the 'New Testament'. Next, I will look at a broad outline of what the issues were during the first five centuries of the Christian era; and before coming to what this one African woman, Amba, wishes to be said about the Christ, I shall peep into the Christology of the missionary era that created the current phase of Christianity in Africa. I begin, therefore, with the biblical account.

In the Protestant theological schema, there is a fundamental principle of revelation, which states that the golden thread running through the whole Bible is 'The Christ'. Obviously one does not intend to debate or do justice to the dictum in such a personal statement. All that can be done is to present a slide show of the meaning of 'The Christ' in the various stages of the development of the biblical materials.

The term 'The Christ', is Greek *ho christos*, meaning 'the anointed one' and is said to be used to translate the Hebrew *messiah*—the same word as in the English. In Hebrew religion and culture, prophets, priests and kings were anointed, as were the sick, the dying and the dead. In

their struggle to survive as a culturally and materially insignificant and martially impotent nation among the powerful ones of the Fertile Crescent, the Hebrews hankered after the return of the one illustrious king they produced, David. Buffeted around by more powerful nations, the People of Israel were sustained by the faith that, in due course, Yahweh will send them a Ruler like David, an anointed one, a Messiah. This hope was very much alive right into the period of the Roman colonization of Palestine.

Before then, with the Babylonian occupation, apocalyptic literature such as the book of Daniel introduced the figure of the human-being who will descend from the clouds with angels to inaugurate a new era of God's Reign. These two figures—'the anointed one' and 'the human one from above'—became the Christian paradigms for the explanation of who Jesus of Nazareth was. Certainly, he was a man from Nazareth, but just as surely he was not like any of the other men of Nazareth. 'Who is this that the winds and the seas obey?', asked his immediate companions. There are several other names used for Jesus: Son of God and Lord occur quite frequently, but the Letter to the Hebrews adds that of High Priest.

Beginning from the first two centuries of the Christian era, parts of which we have in the New Testament, the figure of the Christ as Lord was the most prominent. Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, and that brought persecution to the early believers. As Christianity became more and more fashionable with the inauguration of the Constantinian period, Christ the Glorious King gained ascendancy. The most crucial struggles for the interpretation of who Jesus was ceased to be what he was in relation to the religious and political powers of the age, but rather who he was in view of Greek philosophy (a taste of which we get in John's prologue on the Logos of God in the Fourth Gospel) and Hebrew monotheism. Hence the debates that led to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in which we state what we believe about Jesus the Christ even to this day. Having stated the Christ-events we profess our faith in Jesus the Christ as God and Human, God enfleshed (incarnated) as human, so that we might come a little closer to understanding both divinity and humanity. The debates were endless and several emphases developed in this attempt to state who the Christ is in his nature as divine-human. Later Christologies, however, followed the Pauline line of approaching the issue from the angle of soteriology—what Christians say about salvation. Christology was moving from attempts at ontological statements towards being

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

Rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish understanding of how God deals with persons and peoples, salvation accrued to itself a variety of connotations. An example is evident in the concept of salvation from sin, where sin meant alienation from God and from other human beings. Salvation was seen as liberation from oppressive forces, be they natural and political, sociological and religious. In positive terms, salvation was related to a new beginning, a new life and the full experience of the reign of God. Jesus, the Christ was the agent of it all. His followers began to see his own life as a liberated and liberating one, and to tell of the annunciation of his birth to show how oppressive cultures are set aside in order to bring in the reign of God.

The events of Jesus' life, his solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, his championing of the cause of what is life-giving and his obedience and dependence upon God who alone has life, began to take center stage in the accounts of the preached Christ. That story saw suffering, sacrifice and the Cross, as salvific. The Christ is the one who suffers so that humanity might have the fullness of life intended for them by God. These early efforts have provided road marks for getting on with walking with Jesus. But the Western missionary enterprise in Africa inaugurated a Christology that took no account of Africa's realities beyond the existence of numerous divinities and ancestral spirits. The emphasis, therefore, was Jesus as the only way to God. Jesus, the mediator and high priest, has been consistently preached in the Western churches in Africa, that is, in Roman Catholic and churches of the Reformation.

Meanwhile, Africa kept Africa's realities and fears, and the African Instituted Churches have picked up the fears and have successfully transmitted the faith in a Victorious Christ, Christ the conqueror and the annuler of the powers of Satan (a character created by Christianity), and all the witches and evil spirits who are Satan's agents and emissaries. Since the 1980s a new form of Christianity that dispenses salvation through the total alienation of Africans from African culture and the

instrumentalization of the gospel for material prosperity is taking over the Christian scene. The name of Jesus is peddled by hundreds of Gospel singers and fast energetic liturgies. None of these Christologies have anything special to say to women or from women except that women's prayers and songs tell who the Christ is for them.

The Christ whom African women worship, honor and depend on is the Victorious Christ: knowing that evil is a reality, there is a lot that we bring upon ourselves—in my language this is *mmusu*. But there is also a lot of *Esian* evil that we encounter because of the *mmusu* of others, or from sources we do not understand. It is especially for *Esian* that we need the power of Jesus. Death and life-denying forces are the experience of women and so Christ who countered their powers and gave back the widow of Nain's child to her, is the African woman's Christ (Oduyoye 1989a).

This has been Amba's story. The story of a woman whose concern has been how to make the story of Jesus the context in which African women can read their lives. There are several images of the Christ that are dear to African women and which will be illustrated below. They are also just as 'subjective' but we cannot tell them all. The christological statements of African women have to be heard with the following in mind:

It is rather difficult for me to write an article on Christology from an objective, that is, from an academically theological point of view, for the simple reason that the question as to who and what Christ is, has been a most subjective and absorbing problem for me. My experience and understanding of the person, role and significance of Christ, has been that of a woman on the underside (Ekeya 1988: 17).

Christ is the liberator from the burden of disease and from taboos that restrict women's participation in their communities. The triple burdens of racism, poverty and marginalization are countered by claims that Christ liberates from oppressive cultures. They see the Christ figure as the one who voluntarily lived a life that was life-giving for others and even died for the same. Following Jesus, African women approve of costly sacrifice but they insist it must be voluntary and it must be the duty of both men and women. In a continent and church that does not allow much visibility for women it is necessary that we hear the story of women who write from that location, so we hear excerpts from Bette Ekeya's 'A Christology from the Underside' (1988), on Christ and the single woman or unmarried mother.

Bette's Story

Bette writes from the standpoint of the underside, which she describes as 'any oppressive factor or experience of life which prevents persons from responding successfully to the challenge of developing their fullest humanity'. She specifies further that the underside she is writing from 'is that age-long powerlessness which women have lived with and learned to assimilate as a necessary aspect of being woman in a world defined by men'. This context of powerlessness, she says, has condemned women to positions of subservience. Bette sees subservience and subjugation as what has prevented women from 'fully apprehending the truly good news that Jesus Christ's coming has brought especially for women'. Her story is based on the experience of what she calls 'a new class of African women who are emerging: the single or unmarried mothers'.

Bette describes the African woman in traditional Africa as an intensely practical theologian, living her faith in God within her traditional religious beliefs, cultural taboos and practices. Then came the Christian missions who condemned all this and the African woman who abandoned her rituals in favor of Christianity. Now a vacuum has been created in the lives of the women because it 'is taking a long time for the Christ of the Gospels to become incarnate in the life of the African woman'. Bette describes the Christ of the missionaries as 'a rather forbidding figure...and an exacting judge'. Through preaching she was taught 'a Christ who excluded women from intimate participation in divine mysteries, who seemed to demand of them that they be subjugated, subservient and forever innocent and frozen in religious adolescence'. The Christ of damnation was enthroned in the place of the Christ of liberation.

African women who turned to the African Instituted Churches (AICs) found the hidden Christ of the 'Western Churches'. In the AICs they found the 'victorious Christ'. They discovered Christ's 'power to heal, willingness to suffer with those who suffer, and His joy of liberation.' They found the Christ who 'declared that He had come to set the captives free, to give sight to the blind, wholeness to the lame and to proclaim good news to the poor.' Women now identify with a Christ 'who does not lay unnecessary burdens on their already burdened lives, but one whose power and victory over the powers of darkness they can experience and testify to.' Bette has drawn all this from the lived experiences of actual women whose stories she tells in this article and whose

understanding and experience of Christ she shares with us. Bette concludes: 'It is only fair that (single mothers and others whom the Church excludes) should be enabled to see in Jesus Christ the friend who long ago entrusted one of their kind with the all important mission of announcing the Resurrection to his brothers.' African women indeed do see such a friend in Jesus and they sing in affirmation: 'When we are carrying burdens that bend our backs, who but Jesus helps us set them down?'

The Story of Jesus who Saves

In a continent where physical suffering seems endemic, a suffering Christ is a most attractive figure, for that Christ can be a companion. To the African mind, however, all suffering has to be like birth pangs: it has to lead to a birth, it has to lead to a new beginning, so women create for themselves a Jesus who will mid-wife the birth of the new. In a continent where hunger, thirst and homelessness are the continuous experience of millions, Jesus of Nazareth is a comrade. But women know that although Jesus took on hunger voluntarily, he never accepted deprivation as the destiny of humanity; rather he demonstrated that suffering is not in the plan of God, hence the emphasis of the victorious Christ in African women's spirituality. The back-drop of this Christology shows the world structures and human experiments that are affecting Africans adversely—cut the trees in Brazil and the drought intensifies in the Sahel. So women theologians, in reflecting on the meaning of Jesus in their lives, do not evade the necessity to explore socio-political-economic analysis. They do this in both national and global contexts, but most importantly, they do it from their own daily lives as women in community. In this they are doing what Jesus did:

In his [Jesus'] witness here on earth, Jesus visited all the towns and villages and saw with his own eyes the problems facing the people. He saw poverty, the inequality, the religious and economic oppression, the unemployment, the depression, the physically ill and the socially unclean.

His heart was filled with pity. In his witness Jesus told people: 'the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news' (Kanyoro 1996a [unpublished]).

Christology, for African women, is the story of Jesus who saves, the one who not only announces, but also brings and lives good news.

The Annunciation speaks of God's liberative work in history, but it is a history that singles out women to be God's agents of salvation. In

African women's theology, it is through the living and telling of Jesus who saves, that Christology is to be discerned. Re-telling the Jesus story has unveiled aspects of the gospel which speak to women and which they share with and beyond their faith community. The solidarity of Joseph with Mary, his love and respect for her, his sensitivity to God at work through a woman and his willingness to go against the norms of the culture in order to do the will of God, reflects the approach of Jesus and gives women a handle for discerning God at work and the courage to be at work with God. The Magnificat is a cardinal hermeneutical key for African women's Christology. Their Christology, like the testimonies of Elizabeth and Mary, are anchored on real life experiences.

Terese Souga writes: 'Christology cannot be formulated without taking into account women and their place in Church and society' (Souga 1988: 29). In this joint work by two Cameroonians, there is a general affirmation of African men's Christology, with a caution that it is not adequate because it does not take account of women's experience (Souga 1988: 29). For these women, Christology is not a discourse but a relationship between Jesus and women that leads them to discover for themselves that Jesus reveals God. Louise Tappa writes: 'To work out the full meaning of the Christ-event for humankind' has been the aim of African Christologies. This has meant that women contemplate and thank Jesus in relation to their situation and their praxis. Her Christology, she says, puts more emphasis on the praxis of Jesus who brings women 'full liberation to enable women's self affirmation' (Tappa 1988). A poem, *My Name is Woman*, by Rachel Etrue Tetteh in which she describes her faith journey, is typical of the testimonies that women give of their life in Christ. In part it reads:

I heard of the Good News, now ours
Requiring men and women to hear, read and spread
The Gospel of what Jesus had done for humanity...
His ministry included women freed to make a choice
to follow Christ whose love
includes all men and women...
Daughters of Africa Arise (Tetteh 1990a: 229).

'Freed to choose' could be the organizing principle for most of what African women say about their encounter with Jesus. Jesus is the antidote to their ascribed positions in church and society, the cultural contexts in which they experience the Christ in their lives.

Jesus of African Women

Teresa Hinga in *The Will to Arise* writes on 'Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women', outlining some of the cultural contexts that have influenced the focus of Christology on liberation. She points out however that in the AICs, 'patronized mostly by women', there is a 'pneumatic Christology' at work which 'empowers women to be less inhibited and muted'. The Spirit of Christ is at work here, making Christ the 'voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless'. Also in these churches the prophetic role of Jesus as 'champion of the cause of the voiceless and the vindicator of the marginalised in society' is particularly attractive to women (Hinga 1992: 191). Earlier, Oduyoye had offered a view on Christology under the title 'Jesus Saves' in her *Hearing and Knowing* (Oduyoye 1986: 97-108). Observing the constant use of the affirmation 'Jesus saves', Oduyoye suggests that in a multireligious community the meaning of 'Jesus saves' 'should not be a meta-physical analysis of what it means to be truly God and truly human but rather the christological quest of our times'. The questions she brings to Christology are related to the meaning of the Christ-event in view of the challenges of racism, sexism and other contexts including the multireligious in which we profess Christ.¹

A collection of essays on Christology features three women, namely, Judith Bahemuka, Hannah Kinoti and Anne Nasimiyu (Mugambi and Magesa 1989; Oduyoye 1986: 97-108). All these theologies derive from experience of life in Africa. Bahemuka, however, attempts to unveil the 'Hidden Christ in African Religion', taking seriously Idowu's assertion that we cannot ignore the African Religion in seeking to articulate Christology, if we believe that the God of our creation is the same as the God of our redemption (Idowu 1975: 25; cf. Oduyoye 1986: 75). The theme of Jesus through African idioms has been eloquently demonstrated in *Jesus of the Deep Forest*, the prayers and praises of Efua Kuma, a Ghanaian farmer, mid-wife and a member of an AIC (Kuma 1980). From these three women we retrieve a Christology of Jesus the wonder worker, portrayed in imagery found in African Religion. Jesus was the one who came into the burning furnace to be near us and to walk with us (Dan. 3.25). Jesus is the place of rest. By utilizing imagery from her

1. See Oduyoye (1984), where this concern is expressed.

Akan worldview, Efua Kuma portrays dramatically the paradigm shift that Jesus has introduced into the beliefs about who God is, which have become empowering for her as a woman.

Amoah and Oduyoye (1988) reflect on the Christ as portrayed by African women who see the Christ of Christian Scriptures and tradition as one who has made Africa's business his business. They demonstrate women's close walk with Jesus from Efua Kuma. For many women who go to church, Christ the Word comes as a story. Increasingly, Jesus comes to Africans through the lyrics of 'Gospel Singers' many of whom in Ghana are women. Efua Kuma is the precursor of women's written poetry about Jesus in Ghana. Fanti lyrics and Christian extemporary prayers—yet to be recorded—bear the prayers and praises of women directed to Jesus, and which tell us who they affirm the Christ to be. The language is graphic and moving. Efua Kuma calls to Jesus:

Yesu who has received the poor and makes us honorable our exceedingly wise friend, we depend on you as the tongue depends on the jaw... You are the rock. We hide under you, the great bush with cooling shades, the giant tree who enables the climbers to see the heavens (Kuma 1980: 5).

And women from Northern Nigeria join the chorus 'Jesus the rock, the living rock, I find in thee my resting place, Jesus the living rock'. From these expressions women theologians, like Kinoti, underline the faith of women in Jesus who is real and satisfies any circumstances. Women understand what it means in practice to say that with Jesus one can live the victorious life. Anne Nasimiyu describes Christology 'as a place where we envision the redemption from sin and evil. It is a symbol which encompasses our vision of our authentic humanity and the fulfilled hopes of all human persons' (1991: 70). Recognizing the oppressive context out of which she writes, she observes that African women have learnt tolerance, and that they fatalistically accept the given conditions. When she interviewed some women with the question 'Who is Jesus to you?' she got several images including 'Jesus is my strength, savior, hope, model, helper, teacher, my everything and my God'. 'Jesus is kind and generous and shares in my sorrows when I am in trouble'. So far there has never been a meeting of The Circle without someone raising the hymn 'What a friend we have in Jesus'. They all draw great strength from the relationship of Jesus and women in the Gospels.

Christological Reflections

Reflecting on all this Nasimiyu comes to the following findings: Christology has to respond to the whole of life. In African women's faith expressions we come into contact with a Christology that derives from experience. 'African Christian women need a Christ who relates to God. The God who can be reached through the spirits and the "Living dead" or direct intercession...this God the Christ is the one who takes on the conditions of African women: conditions of weakness, misery, injustice and oppression'. African women's Christology, as Nasimiyu portrays it, unveils the Christ who empowers women to reject androcentric culture, the one who comes to heal our broken communities, and who empowers and enables the downtrodden to realize their dignity and worth as persons (a summary of Nasimiyu 1989: 124-31).² She finds a variety of Christologies from women's witness to Jesus. There are several well-known christological models to be discerned from women's stories: eschatological, anthropological, liberational and cosmological. Nasimiyu's summaries of these types are reflected below.

In the eschatological, Jesus is experienced as 'sent by God to an alienated world where the presence of God takes the shape of the crucified one'. This is the Jesus who suffers and dies, but is ultimately victorious over death. This model attempts to respond to the question 'Why does one who is perfect and righteous have to suffer and to die, the death of a criminal?' It points to the resurrection, 'the ultimate victory over this world's alienating forces...and opens a future for a new humanity'. Nasimiyu discerns from this that women accept the teaching that Christ takes on our suffering, so we are invited to take on and 'participate in the restoration of harmony, equality and inclusiveness in all human relationships, in the family, society and Church'.

On the anthropological model she writes: 'God calls us in Christ to a life-style that is dedicated to the love of neighbor and to a life which puts others first and gives them life.' She describes Jesus as the mother, the nurturer of life, especially that of the weak. This reflects, accurately, the African women's primary experience of themselves in relation to others as mothers. But Nasimiyu does not neglect to point out that Jesus

2. Nasimiyu concludes that if one wishes to theorize about women's Christology one could find several well-known models. But that would not be the voices of African women.

recognized women as responsible persons and took them seriously (Lk. 8.1-3; 11.27-28). She adds: 'Today Jesus would have insisted on women being also theological teachers, catechists, biblical interpreters, counselors... (and as persons) called to restore the church and humanity to the initial inclusive, holistic and mutual relationships between women and men.'

On the liberational model, Christ is the liberator. Nasimiyu declares that 'Jesus asks African women not to accept their hardships and pain fatalistically but to work at eliminating the suffering and creating a better place for all.' Looked at it from this stand point, she sees women's struggles becoming 'God's struggles... It is then Jesus who suffers in them and their works to give birth to new and better human relationships.' Marie Assaad commenting on Lk. 1.26-45 sees in the passage God's reversing of what we say is the 'natural order'. God reverses all we take as the natural order of this world and is still asking us today to reverse this order (Assaad 1986: 25-27). The liberation that Christ brings covers all creation: thus in the cosmological model, Christ restores the whole cosmos (Rom. 8; 20-23). The groaning creation, as in the pain of childbirth, is to reconcile all things to God. She adds: 'Jesus of the gospels was sensitive to beauty of lilies, birth, beautiful weddings, beauty of a human body without disease. So Jesus is right with us as we heal, restoring nature, individuals and communities.'

In all these studies of Jesus and women in the Gospels, African women see the initiative and participation of women as important. Mary's saying 'Yes' to God; the women going to the tomb; the woman who decided to break the rules in Mk 5.25-29; the Samaritan woman—all relate Christology to women's lives. Grace Eneme ends her reflection on 'Living Stones' with:

Sisters, power has been given to us by God. By the world's standards it can never be given to us. We have to struggle for it grab it. So gird up your loins. Christ our Liberator is our captain—that is the empowerment that comes from African women's companionship with Jesus (Eneme 1986: 32).

We observe that African women's Christology derives directly from the Gospels highlighting women's presence in the life and teaching of Jesus. The cultural hermeneutic out of which they reflect, enables them to see the ambiguities of the Jesus model as culture-coded and therefore open to transformation. The focus is on liberating the humanity of women and others whom society counts for nothing. The divine disposition is

recognized by women in the Gospels, as evident in the lives of Mary, Martha and the Samaritan woman. In the Christology of African women we find Jesus the compassionate one.

The Language of Christology

In this survey we encounter the central theme of Jesus, the suffering messiah, whose nature and work is to save, for suffering and struggle are the contexts of this Christology. Christology is not meant to analyze the nature of Christ, but to identify saving acts and to cling in hope of liberation. Secondly, it is to celebrate the victories over domination and death and to attribute these to Jesus rather than to any other power. Amoah and Oduyoye (1988) focus on the victorious Christ who liberates from disease and ostracism, the child of a woman who has become the friend of women, a caring and compassionate nurturer of all. Jesus is the servant, who washes his disciples' feet, reflecting the spirituality of women's service. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb of God, points out to women the need for living sacrifice in the human community. Jesus, who breaks down barriers between God and us by forgiving our sins, also calls us to a ministry of reconciliation. In Christ all things hold together, giving back to women the integrity of their humanity. The figure of Jesus enables African women to see the Christ in the refugee. What African women's Jesus reminds us of, is that traditional Christian Christology derives from the varieties of experiences of the first followers of Jesus. African women continue this tradition. It is in the process of seeking resources from Christianity to deal with the life-denying and life-threatening contexts of Africa, that Christian women turn to Jesus. In Jesus they find resources to transform the obstacles and suffering they meet. That is why their songs are full of acknowledgment of Jesus who helps them lay down their burdens. They find examples from Scripture of Jesus as breaking the chains and the burdens of poverty, disease and exploitation. The burdens that arise from African culture are carried to Jesus as they appropriate the promises of the annunciation.

The factor of the incarnation in Christology is taken for granted. It is an area where faith accepts without plumbing the depth of meaning, admitting our limited access to knowledge of what we call reality. Jesus is a child of God *par excellence* and that is enough. Jesus is the 'man of Nazareth' who lived the life of God in the limited space of our human context. It is thus that African women appropriate Jesus as the 'anointed

one of God' the Messiah. It is important for all Africans, but especially women, that this person, born in someone else's backyard, has lived the life of God on earth and continues to accompany all in similar circumstances to live their full humanity so that they too might reflect the God in whose image they are created. It was important to believe that Jesus is the anointed one of God, empowered and sent by God to show humanity what it means to live fully the image in which we are made. Living fully has come to mean resisting oppression, transforming potential death into life and believing that the resurrection happens every time we defeat death and begin a new life. This is the good news and the good experiences realized or hoped for, that give African women joy in Jesus.

Christology, therefore, takes the form of appropriating the Christ-event, seeing oneself in the daily drama that Jesus lives from cradle to cross and beyond. The circumstances of his birth are daily realities for women in Africa. Jesus' outrage against oppressive culture encourages women not to condone oppression. Jesus lived by the future of God articulated in the Magnificat, the hymn attributed to his mother. The caring compassionate healer is another strong face of Jesus that women appropriate. The lives they live need this Jesus who can exorcise the evil that torments Africa and gnaws at the womb of her daughters. Seeped in African Religion and believing in Jesus, women are able to proclaim the Jesus who breaks the chains of evil. Jesus feeds the hungry and sets free the victims of patriarchy: he is therefore the Christ for African women who know all too well the bondage of both. African women who have known Jesus, however, no longer fatalistically accept the given conditions. They refuse the Cross, as the end of their life's experience, for without the Resurrection, faith in Christ would no longer be unique. Jesus beckons them to endure the Cross, but promises fullness of life as the final outcome of their discipleship. To see Christianity grow out of the religion of Jesus the suffering servant, is what keeps African women attached to Jesus.

In the African women's Christology no distinction is made between salvation and liberation. Women are the products of Africa's holistic worldview and Jesus is experienced as responding to the totality of life. Emmanuel Larrey has described African women's Christology as 'liberation Christology', since women's aim is that Christology should be liberative as well (Larrey 1993: 82-84). Through this Christology they lay claim to the freedom they have in Jesus and are able to affirm this with the song:

I have my liberty now
Jesus has set me free now.

Liberation through Jesus is a daily reality. The editors' abstract on Bonita Bennet's contribution to *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free* (Bennet 1986) is as follows: 'only a return to the Jesus movement and to the latter's perspective on women can offer contemporary women some ideological weapons of struggle for the fight which they are inevitably engaged in'.³ In Bennett's article we see an example of Africans' perception and experience of Jesus as standing up for women. They find in him a revolutionary stance in the patriarchal context in which he had to operate. Women take courage from the 'sensitivity and openness' of Jesus to women which enabled him to 'treat women as partners in his mission, not glorifying or belittling them' but relating to them as human beings made in the image of God. With Jesus the full humanity of women was an unquestionable fact.

3. Whether the women's reference to Christ should be classified as an ideology is not the issue, but it is worth noting that it is symptomatic of the inability to accept women as partners in the theological enterprise in Africa.