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Book Review

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Editors), 2006, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 278 pages.

Reviewed by Eddah Mutua-Kombo*

This book, a collection of essays, edited by Phiri and Nadar, focuses on the traditional understanding of women of Africa. The thirteen authors (eleven Africans) address two critical issues—health and religion—and the extent to which these issues affect the daily lives of African women. While the book does not ‘speak’ directly to communication studies, it should be seen as an opportunity to enrich the capacity of African communication scholars to rethink ways to develop African knowledge that are grounded in understanding cultural patterns and communication styles of African women. This should become part of the discourse in our field. In one sense, we can develop and expand African knowledge by acknowledging and sharing the numerous ways that different disciplines inform each other about current research on issues that affect African people. Such interdisciplinary discourse would contribute to scholars reclaiming the centrality of African cosmology in shaping how we produce and promote African knowledge in its various manifestations.

The thirteen essays in this book focus on the life of Professor Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, a woman they all had shared experiences with. Professor Oduyoye is the founder of the ‘Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians’, a gathering of African women theologians. Circle members comprise of women who are rooted in Islam, Christianity and African traditional religions (20). There are four parts to the book, all devoting space to address diverse issues that form a complicated public and private discourse, and have gendered implications for

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human progress and in particular women and development in Africa. The wide range of topics discussed in this book reveal the diverse nature of the subjects and issues these women have come to address in their lives—sexual violence, gender discrimination and inequality, HIV/AIDS, poverty, effects of Structural Adjustment Programs, war and conflict, and oppressive religious and cultural practices that limit women's capacity to function in society. The women also focused on knowledge and wealth creation.

Dube's essay, for example, presents a sound critique of the structural epistemology 'that assumes that the West holds the best answers for the whole world—civilization, progress, language, science, faith, its brand of democracy, medicine, law, education, environmental care, development and freedom' (134). She argues that African cosmology was robbed of creatively informing its own communities about the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The effect was that the epidemic seemed distanced from the people since it was scientifically discovered in the West by the West. This view got people to self-distance themselves from the disease, a factor that has become deadly on the African continent.

As a communication scholar with a research interest in women, I resonated well with the book's running theme which is a celebration of women's resistance from silence to voice. The book reminds us all of the importance of recognizing and acknowledging different ways of knowing. There might be other books out there written by African women but this is really the first in my view that breaks the silence of the taboo topics in Africa (e.g. sexuality, childlessness). The essayists are women who would not be expected by virtue of their strong Christian or Catholic upbringing, training and work in theology, and above all by the African culture to outwardly challenge patriarchy. They agree that it was not easy to engage in open dialogue 15 years ago but they have grown to the point where they can freely name and language their issues.

The essayists honor Professor Oduyoye for empowering them to move from silence to voice. The voice that the women present in this book is one that is well grounded in a sound array of theoretical frameworks—feminist, Africanist, theological, womanist—that illuminate and problematize socio-cultural, political, and economic institutions which are often the basis of African women's subordination. All the essays inform us of the centrality of women's knowledge; its power and worth in transforming conditions that women of Africa face in life. The use of personal narratives allows the essayists to get to a place in their personal lives where no one has been before apart from themselves. This journey whose product

is this very thought provoking book reveals that women creating their own knowledge is a way to liberate themselves from the deep pains of silence.

The essayists make it clear to their readers that African scholars have to place Christianity and its sister/ brother colonialism at the center of the analyses of how both institutions have transformed the way Africans lead their lives and construct their knowledge on a daily basis. A point made clear is that there is a need to rethink knowledge construction. What the women share in the essays is what they have learned from Prof. Oduyoye's writings and mentoring leading them to reach a place where they can recreate themselves and name their issues in a very candid way. The essay titled 'wise woman bearing gifts' talks about how Prof. Oduyoye has helped women of Africa to create their own theology. It includes a quote from her book: *The will to arise: women, traditions and the church in Africa* (1992) that has inspired others to reclaim their knowledge and to recreate the self. She asserts that 'African women theologians have come to realize that as long as men and foreign researchers remain the authorities on culture, rituals and religion, African women will continue to be spoken of as if they were dead' (55).

This book brings value added knowledge to those interested in issues that affect the people we love the most; our mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces and wives. My initial expectations that the book might not present the issues a certain way (and what way is this?-the way that shrouds women's pain and suffering) were wrong. I found that the essays contain valuable and noble ideas about how African women through the 'Circle' have broken the ranks of the theology of inculturation and began to talk about taboo topics in public. Njoroge's essay 'power of naming' is inspired by Professor Oduyoye's boldness to talk about her own childlessness. She notes that Professor Oduyoye has empowered women to talk about those taboo topics that cause injustice, indignity and human suffering. She references Professor Oduyoye's assertion that 'the silence that shrouds the issue of childlessness compounds its potential for the disempowering of women'. Njoroge argues that by writing from her experience, Professor Oduyoye has broken one chain of conspiracy that patriarchy and its collaborators sexism, use to debase women's identity and dignity. The uncovering of the taboo topics would not be possible if Professor Oduyoye and the circle women had not made an active and deliberate effort to construct new ways of naming the pain and loss women face in the context of injustice, indignity and suffering.

The book's strength as an edited volume lies in the manner in which it carries diversity of views, and a wide range of topics and diverse experi-

ences. It is grounded on Christian theology, feminist and womanist thought, and yet remains firmly rooted in African cosmology. The presentation of the arguments developed clearly reveal the basis of what shapes women's discourse patterns, that is, their shared experiences which bring them together in the 'circle' to negotiate these experiences and then, create and share their meaning to other women and the world.

The last essay titled 'From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance' highlights the benefits that come with women's endurance to live and thrive. It promotes the notion of continued existence which is the 'ability to last without giving way'. This affords dignity and meaning to women's lives that is enhanced by the knowledge that women recreate for themselves. The analysis of the issues discussed is eminently applicable to scholars and students interested in the development and integration of 'African knowledge' into the evolving global knowledge economy. Additionally, the analysis also highlights the issues that communication educators need to make part of their discourse about expanding communication education in Africa.

African educators and researchers will find this book useful in number of ways. First, it helps them examine their standpoint in relation to women, health and religion in the context of indigenizing African knowledge. Second, it offers educators a way to enhance their pedagogical approach to development issues in Africa. For example, the discussion on pedagogical approaches to HIV/AIDS was very enlightening. Dube's essay proposes community-oriented pedagogy for HIV/AIDS prevention that must be preceded by a curriculum transformation that seeks to decolonize the place, the approach and the content of the syllabus and programs. She adds that these changes must be informed by African cosmology.