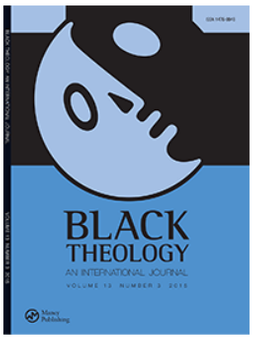

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Black Theology
An International Journal

ISSN: 1476-9948 (Print) 1743-1670 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yblt20

Anthropology, Mission and the African Woman: A Womanist Approach

Linda Thomas

To cite this article: Linda Thomas (2007) Anthropology, Mission and the African Woman: A Womanist Approach, Black Theology, 5:1, 11-19, DOI: 10.1558/blth.2007.5.1.11

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1558/blth.2007.5.1.11

[*BT* 5.1 (2007) 11–19]
doi: 10.1558//blth2007.5.1.11

ISSN (print) 1476-9948
ISSN (online) 1743-1670

Anthropology, Mission and the African Woman: A Womanist Approach

Linda E. Thomas
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615
USA
lthomas@lstc.edu

Abstract

This essay is adapted from a number of public lectures given by Linda Thomas, an African-American Womanist theologian and anthropologist. In this piece, the author calls on Christians to consider a new paradigm for mission by privileging the voices of those we have violated by our attempt to fulfill the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28. In particular, she lifts up the voices of African women who have much to teach us. By listening to and receiving the hospitality of African women, the author learns to be missionized; that is, to see God in a people not indoctrinated by Christianity. This paradigm for mission, though seemingly revolutionary, is one Jesus advocates in Luke, chapters nine and ten.

I come to the task of understanding and analyzing mission from a hermeneutic of plurality.[1] I work from my many contexts, and thus, I consider myself a multi-disciplined scholar. I approach this project first from my social location.

I work as a black woman—but with the juxtaposition of being an African-American *Christian* woman, ordained in the United Methodist Church. I am called to the *missio dei*, to evangelize—to witness to Christ's presence. I work necessarily from a place of tension and complexity; from a hermeneutic of plurality. I approach my work as an African-American ordained Christian theologian in the Womanist tradition. I am also an anthropologist.

1. I want to express thanks to my research assistant, Jamie Jazdzyk, for conceptualizing the notion of "plural" in our conversations about this lecture.

In this essay, I am using an ethnographic methodology to examine what second, third, fourth and fifth generation African Christians have to say about mission on their continent. *Missio dei*—what we know as the "Great Commission" from Matthew 28:16–20—has been interpreted in the western world as commanding Christians to go all over the earth telling people about their God and propagating and teaching western ways. [By the way, the words, "Great Commission" do not appear in the passage itself.]

This traditional, imperial approach of *missio dei*—to entering a new community, culture or religion—does not work with my approach to anthropology and mission. Rather, the method I use, both for understanding *missio dei* and conducting research, better fits with Luke's version of *missio dei* (Luke 9:1-9; 10:1-10). Here, Jesus sends the disciples out, not with an agenda of telling about Jesus. Rather, he sends his disciples with no bag, food or much else for that matter. Jesus sends them out not to call people to receive Christ but, quite contrarily, to stand at the door of the stranger, both hungry and tired, with the hope that the good people of the house or the street will receive them, feed them, and save the disciples from the elements.

This is the approach I take as a theologian trained in anthropology. In my work, I am missionized; a concept to which I will return later in this essay. I come to the persons, communities, diaries and songs of Africa in order to listen. As an anthropologist, I cannot be a community member. I am a guest, who is privileged to privilege the voices of Africans, and their histories of Christian mission. I rely on sources whose voices respect the pluralities and dynamism of African religiosity, culture, and philosophy. More specifically, I privilege those voices that for far too long have not been, and are not yet, given the authority due them.The intent of this article is to provide a means for us to be missionized by the scholarship of Africans, primarily women.

Liberation Defined

Let me speak plainly. Christians, well-intended for the most part, have "jacked up", pardon me; they have erred, sometimes, to understand and devote their lives to the *missio dei*. A close reading of much classical theology—so-called "orthodox" theology—supports the notion of *missio dei* as being one of telling, curing, saving, "doing something to" people who believe differently about the cosmos. In the final analysis, *missio dei* has been about telling others that we have the keys to the kindom.[2] Others have to get on board with the program, and

2. I use the term *kin*dom rather than kingdom to move toward relational language and away from hierarchical notions such as kingdom.

then, we can teach "them." All we need are a few bibles, some guns, sexually transmitted diseases, western social structures, education, proper clothing, oppressive sexual mores, and patriarchal church structures.

When I listen to those whose continent has been cut up by well-intentioned Christian men, chopped apart in ways that cause famine, I hear movement. I hear the Spirit of African women—no less than the Spirit of God—moving out from under the systemic poverty, sexism and racism that were planted inside the missionizing churches. I hear a movement; one that I have witnessed in Ghana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa; this is a movement of liberation.

Today, the only *missio dei* must have liberation at its core. It is, of course, the message in which our Scriptures are soaked. Biblically, from Isaiah to Luke to Revelation, the history of the people of God is one of a God who liberates. In Trinitarian language, the Spirit creates, liberates and sustains. Ruach never stops making something new or making something happen. The question at hand is, who among us will slow down enough to listen to this good news, or who among us will sit at the feet of the women of Sudan, of Chad or of Uganda or of Nigeria, to hear their good news?

Let us receive, and be duly missionized by, the African woman; namely, the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Odoyoye, whose breath speaks these words of liberative *missio dei*, appropriated from Isaiah:

> The poor will hear good news.
> Those who are depressed will feel the comfort that
> Stimulates action;
> Those who are oppressed will be encouraged and
> Enabled to free themselves
> Abilities rather than disabilities will be what counts.[sic]
> All who are blind to their own and others' oppression
> Will come to new insights
> And God will pardon all at the jubilee.
> It will be a new beginning for all.[3]

The Concept of the African Woman

The *missio dei* must not only understand but also honor the *imago dei* made manifest across the diverse cultures of Africa. All African women are made in the image of God. In the words of the African women theologians and ethicists

3. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 4.

in the "Circle of Concerned African Women", the *missio dei* is best fulfilled when it examines "the socio-economic and political situation in Africa through women's experiences."[4]

Thus, my approach to missiology recognizes that the transcendent Spirit finds expression, creatively and immanently, in the vast array of beliefs, customs and ways of living among African women. Likewise, the transcendent Spirit knows intimately that economic, political and social systems and situations oppress African women and do violence to the *imago dei* that is each African woman. Oppression of African women is "transgeographical."[5] Oppression of African women is oppression of God's own image and energy.

Fashioning a Theory for Doing a Womanist Approach to Mission

Understanding that all African women embody the *imago dei*, I utilize a Womanist approach to mission. Alice Walker defines Womanism in her text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.[6] Theologian Dwight Hopkins claims that, "Walker's four-part definition contains aspects of (1) tradition; (2) community; (3) self, nature, and the Spirit; and (4) criticism of white feminism."[7] In this sense, a Womanist is one who recognizes that she is made in the image of God (i.e., the *imago dei*). Once she is conscious of her positive relation to the divine, she celebrates this by taking the good news of liberation to others (i.e., the *missio dei*).

A Womanist theologian, then, privileges the voices and gives authority to the perspectives and experiences of women of African descent. The approach to mission is to be missionized: It is to listen to the testimony and to witness to the Spirit of God in action, whilst resisting the desire to proclaim, tell or contest. We must be saved by these women. By means of their experience, as the hands and feet of the Lord in whose name they have forcibly baptized; these women know a thing or two about insurrection, resurrection and life

4. Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra, Ghana: Legon Theological Studies Series Project in collaboration with Asempa Publishers, 2000), 126.

5. Irma McClaurin, "Introduction: Forging a Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics of Black Feminist Anthropology," in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 9.

6. Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press, 1984).

7. Dwight Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 130.

everlasting. They survive and subvert systems with wisdom and courage that "shock and awe." My role as a Womanist theologian and anthropologist, then, is to release the voices of those whose stories are untold.

Three African Scholars' Reflections about Missionaries and the Impact of Christian Missions on Africa

Let us now listen as some African people tell us something of the history and experience of Christian mission. We begin with a story I first heard from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a third generation African Christian; heard again, recently, from Randall Robinson, an African-American lawyer, author, and former head of "TransAfrica". Please pay attention, as it is a short story. "When the missionaries came to us, we had the land and they had the Bibles. We reverently bowed our heads to pray and when we concluded our prayer and looked up, we had the Bibles and the missionaries had the land."

This parable tells the truth the way parables tend to do, by shocking listeners from the comfort zone and rousing the cozy out of tradition. I find myself amazed at the resistance toward listening to the truth in such narratives. In many Christian communities, this parable would be considered exaggeration, created only for shock value, dismissed as angry hyperbole, and simply fictional. Last time I checked, the Jesus of parables and the parables of Jesus met more than their fair share of resistance. The power of narrative is the way the story speaks truth to power. In the rich tradition of African-American literature, fiction most certainly tells the truth.

Our question, then, is what does the painful past reveal about the ecclesiastical tendency to systematically oppress the *imago dei* expressed differently from the image/idol created in the minds and from the contexts of the missionaries? What would happen if we truly listened and considered the narrative and the authoritative word that trumps our own? Ultimately, Christian mission theories and practice do not listen with the intent of being transformed and changed themselves by what is said by the "other". The history of Christian mission provides vivid evidence of the way that listening rarely equals structural transformation. Or, more plainly, the history of Christian mission provides vivid evidence that what we call listening is a way we tell a good story. If we are listening with an agenda, with firm resolve and definite conviction, we cannot honestly call that listening, can we? Perhaps, we need to listen in order to be missionized.

Let us listen to the words of Ogbu U. Kalu, a third generation Nigerian Christian, who is the Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity and

Mission at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL.[8] Kalu's seminal article, "Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process," clearly locates the problem in "missionary history."[9] Kalu writes,

> Missionary history was and still is being written by missionaries and their protégés who have swallowed missionary ideology hook, line, and sinker. Missionary history is propagandist and unanalytical.[10]

Already we hear a harsh critique of one who received many benefits from the mission movement but knows personally the cost that was exacted. Kalu argues that missionary history produced a literary genre that "focused on how the Gospel came" to different parts of Africa but "ignored the socio-economic and political background of the host communities."[11] Moreover, Kalu asserts that, "The history of Christianity in Africa is not only what missionaries did or did not do but also what Africans thought about what was going on and how they responded."[12]

It is this second point that gives a concrete lesson for those undertaking a liberative approach to mission. Such an approach, according to Kalu,

> should analyze the inner dynamics of the evangelization process, perceiving that process as an encounter between viable cosmologies and cultures. This method rejects European Christianity as the starting point of African church history. On the contrary, Africa and its cultures constitute the starting point.[13]

A third important lesson is to acknowledge and appreciate the "alive universe" of various African peoples. For example, anthropologist R. S. Rattray does a remarkable job in describing the Ghanaian Ashanti religion and culture depicted in Ashanti cosmology.[14] He presents a vibrant cosmology with an elaborate social order.

Finally, Kalu advances a salient point, which is especially noteworthy for those who desire to learn from past mistakes. He says,

8. Ogbu U. Kalu, "Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process," in *African Theology En Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 13.
9. Kalu, "Church Presence in Africa," 13.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Ibid., 14.
12. Ibid., 14.
13. Ibid., 14.
14. Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923; reprint Westport, CT: Creenwood/African Universities Press, 1969).

> missionaries came [to Africa] with an amazing degree of confidence in the supremacy of Christianity and the European social and economic order. They came with the certainty that they were obeying the Great Commission to go into all the world, baptizing and making disciples of all nations. Such a sense of certainty often produced hard-headed insensitivity toward indigenous cultures.[15]

Is it possible to fulfill the Great Commission and have sensitivity toward and respect for indigenous cultures? Yes, I believe it is possible, if one loses his or her own cultural arrogance and is faithful to a liberative proclamation of the Gospel. Now the question is, is this even possible?

Musa Dube of Botswana thinks not. She writes from her own hermeneutic of plurality. Dube is an African Christian woman and New Testament scholar, and identifies herself as postcolonial and feminist. Through these multiple dimensions, she finds clarity. She argues convincingly that imperialism is in play whenever a dominant nation imposes economic, political and cultural institutions upon foreign ones. Dube contends that mission is an imported cultural institution and as such

> it is important to determine whether its strategies advocate power relations that resonate with the model of liberating interdependence or embrace a model consistent with imperialistic impositions.[16]

The bold and audacious character of Womanist theology and the critical eye of anthropology lead me to argue that mission cannot escape imperialist tendencies. In other words, mission as we know it bears a striking resemblance to imperialist imposition.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye examines missionaries' inability to understand that only those who practise indigenous religions and rituals can make a judgment about their modification or their usefulness. Africans themselves have the ultimate responsibility for evaluating their use.[17] As I hear this African woman scholar, who trained at Cambridge University, speak, I believe that, perhaps, we could come closer together if the missionizers would turn around their mission and listen to the breath, wind and spirit that speaks through the language, culture and religion of African persons who are created in the very image of what is most holy.

15. Kalu, "Church Presence in Africa," 18.

16. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 128.

17. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 9–10.

Returning to Lukan Model of Mission

If we listen to Jesus instruct his disciples, we do not even need to bring Jesus when we encounter others. In Luke's account, the disciples embark on a very radical—and far more Jesus-like—mission. They go out as beggars; they have nothing to give. They are not teachers, nor proselytizers. They go out to encounter God's kindom in ways quite unorthodox. The disciples can only hope that someone in the street or in a house will receive them in mercy and with grace. The disciples had to rely on others.

The disciples did not bring God to others; no introduction was necessary. God's image greeted them at the door. The Word came to them when a stranger outside the gate said, "I have some extra bread if you're hungry." The disciples' work had nothing to do with changing others, and everything to do with changing themselves. We do not create the kindom; we receive it when we are invited in just as we are; when we are accepted by the *imago dei* of a stranger who offers to wash our dirty feet.

We do not build the kindom by convincing African women to give up honoring ancestors. Rather, we glimpse the kindom when we listen to the Word spoken and see the image of God in women living in Africa. The *missio dei* is in our midst precisely when we forget our mission bag with Jesus in it.

In the parabolic way Jesus prefers to teach, the disciples go to new towns and meet new people not to change but to be changed; not to tell but to listen; not with power but by being helpless. Jesus' approach to *missio dei* is far less complicated and far more demanding. We have to live an ethic of *koinonia*—welcoming, receiving and experiencing the Word and cherishing the *imago dei* in people with whom we do not, particularly, have anything in common.

We received a glimpse of the very *missio dei* from the pluralities of *imago dei* and multiple expressions of Spirit offered by women of African descent. We experienced "mission possible."

Conclusion

In this essay I have examined mission from the hermeneutic of plurality. My social location as an African-American Womanist anthropologist informs my understanding of the *missio dei*. Most importantly, my understanding of the gospel necessitates that I open myself to be missionized as I stand present with others, particularly African women, to understand the amazing way that God in Jesus Christ works in the world. My understanding of the gospel means that I bring a liberation approach to mission as I oppose structures that negatively impact on the lives of African women who are made in God's image.

Second, third, fourth and fifth generation African scholars have raised their voices to say that mission has to dispense with imperialism, and I submit that perhaps the best thing that *missio dei* can do is to influence governments and churches in the first world to be missionized by the liberating work of Jesus Christ made known to us through, particularly, poor, African women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dube, M. W. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000.

Hopkins, D. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Kalu, O. U. "Church Presence in Africa: A Historical Analysis of the Evangelization Process." In *African Theology En Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981.

McClaurin, I. "Introduction: Forging a Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics of Black Feminist Anthropology." In *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Njoroge, N. J. *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*. Accra, Ghana: Legon Theological Studies Series Project in collaboration with Asempa Publishers, 2000.

Oduyoye, M. A. "Women and Ritual in Africa." In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.

—*Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Rattray, R. S. *Ashanti*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923. Repr. Westport, CT: Creenwood/African Universities Press, 1969.

Walker, A. *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. London: Women's Press, 1984.