



## 5 | INTERPRETING AND RE-INTERPRETING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURAL BELIEFS THROUGH FEMINIST LENS IN THE WORKS OF HELEN LABEODAN

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### Abstract

African worldviews have been understood and misunderstood within two popular contexts that were produced by neo-colonialism and the praxis of the people. First, the Western context, thereby leading to a hasty conclusion that Africans do not have a philosophy of religion and wrong juxtaposing of the African worldviews within the Western ones and *vice versa* which result to erroneous analyses and inadequate submissions. Second, the context of patriarchal narratives and mindsets, whereby practices, beliefs and views leave the feminine folk at a disadvantage. It is within these two contexts that Helen Labeodan situates her philosophical propositions and theology whereby her works interpret and re-interpret African Philosophy, especially metaphysics and cultural beliefs from a feminist perspective. This study seeks to analyse and investigate the uniqueness of her works as an African woman and philosopher who carries the burden of bequeathing a liberating theology. To this view, this study is poised to answering the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her philosophical propositions? How did her philosophical propositions address patriarchy and wrong interpretations of African Philosophy? What could be identified as the purpose of her theology? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of a West African Feminist philosopher, Helen Labeodan.

**Keywords:** Helen Labeodan, Feminist Philosophy, African Women, Metaphysics, Gender

### Introduction

Long after the exit of colonial masters from the shores of Africa, the people still grapple with the effects of the presence and control of the Europeans among them. Neo colonialism is the fruit of colonialism and it is

an influential force with which powerful nations shape the culture of the supposed weaker nations. Although this motive is often driven by economic reasons, it no doubt influences the way of life of the less powerful nations. Thus, Africans were convinced to drop their names, dressing, religion, culture and ways of life. Aspects of living that were not swayed were influenced. It is within this context that the African worldviews have been understood and also misunderstood because issues related to Africans were viewed from the Western point of view. In addition, the patriarchal nature of most African societies coloured the understanding of African worldviews whereby mindsets, practices, beliefs and views were mostly seen from the masculine perspective. These two paradigms have left the feminine folks at a very great disadvantage. The vulnerability of women became enshrined in systems which appear designed to keep them perpetually on the lowest rung of the ladder and mostly exploited. Women have remained the poorest, the least educated and least seen in the helms of power, and more worrisome is the experience of the women of colour. Although there have been some improvements in the past decades as a result of movements fighting for the emancipation of women and other feminist and womanist driven quests, the situation is still a far cry for what ought to be.

It is within these realities that Circle West Africa matriarchs have written theologies of liberation for black women from their personal and collective struggles driven by social, cultural, religious, political and economic frameworks. According to Mercy Oduyoye as quoted by Labeodan (2016), “Theologizing is seen mainly as male prerogative; hence, women for a very long time were excluded, mostly black women. Helen stated further that it was against this bedrock that Mercy Amba Oduyoye averred that women need to be visible in theology and also in religion and culture because these were areas that affected them directly.”

Helen Labeodan, a Circle West Africa matriarch, African woman and philosopher, situates her philosophical propositions and theology within these struggles of Africa Women Theologians. Her works showcase her passion for the interpretation and re-interpretation of African Philosophy, especially metaphysics and cultural beliefs from a feminist perspective. To this end, this study seeks to analyse and investigate the uniqueness of her works as an African woman and philosopher who carries the

burden of bequeathing a liberating theology. This study is therefore poised to answering the following research questions: What were the cultural and religious contexts that motivated her works? What were the sources of her findings which led to her philosophical propositions? How did her philosophical propositions address patriarchy and wrong interpretations of African Philosophy? What could be identified as the purpose of her theology? These and other similar questions will be answered in this study with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of a West African feminist philosopher, Prof. Helen Labeodan.

## **Who is Professor Helen Adekunbi Labeodan Nee Adetunji?**

### ***Childhood, Family Background and Religion***

Helen A. Labeodan was born into the Adetunji family, a Yoruba family of six, the third of four children and the only daughter, both parents were well educated. Her mother retired as a school educator while her father retired as the secretary of Central Bank of Nigeria. She was raised in a Roman Catholic Christian home. A number of Helen's early works were published in her maiden name, Adetunji.

### ***Education***

Helen A. Labeodan attended Onward Nursery and Primary School Lagos and began her secondary school education at the Lagos Anglican Girls Grammar School but was later transferred to Ire Akari Grammar School, Isolo Lagos due to the stress of long-distance commuting which had effects on her studies when the family relocated to Ire Akari Estate. Helen was introduced to leadership positions from a young age as she was the head girl of Ire Akari Grammar school, where she completed her secondary school education. Helen went further in her education as she attended Federal Government Girls' College Sagamu for her A'Levels, where she spent a year instead of two because of her subsequent passing of the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Exam (JAMB). She gained admission into the University of Ibadan to study Religious Studies, and the course was her first choice of study. Helen was attracted to Religious Studies because of how they were taught African Traditional Religion during her lower 6 Class.

Helen A. Labeodan was so thrilled during this exposure to the study of religion that she ran after the teacher and asked if this course was studied at the university. Shortly, after this time, her father told her he had purchased her JAMB form and wanted to know what course she wanted to study in the University, to which she said Religious Studies. Though her parents could not understand the motive for this choice, they were supportive because of their belief in encouraging their children's passion. This was how she found herself in Religious Studies, although according to her, at that time she did not know what she was going to do with the course. She did her mandatory one-year National Youth service at Immanuel College of Theology Samonda, Ibadan and this was where she was introduced to teaching and also the beginning of her academic career.

### ***Career***

Helen fell in love with teaching, especially seeing her students learning, understanding and articulating what they have learnt. This influenced her decision to go into academics and she made up her mind to become a lecturer during her service year. She began her career at the University of Ibadan as an Assistant lecturer and she has risen through the ranks to become a professor.

### ***Marriage, Family and Sources of Motivation***

Helen got married to her husband, Mr Olusakin Labeodan on the 26th of December, 1996. He also graduated from the University of Ibadan, he is well read and also has an M.B.A. He had his academic background in Statistics and he is successfully practicing in the field of Insurance. The happy union is blessed with three children, two girls named Romade and Romola and a boy named Romayo. The grace of God, and the support of her families; her immediate family, her husband, her parents and parents in law have been her greatest sources of motivation. Her passion has always been seeing students succeed, mentoring and follow up on students.

## Cultural and Religious Contexts that Motivated Labeodan's Works

Yoruba cultural beliefs play a huge role in the philosophy of Helen A. Labeodan and she proudly flaunts the Yoruba heritage in her works. In the words of Olusanya, where he opines on the uniqueness of the Yoruba race:

There is probably no other African people who have commanded as much attention of scholars of all disciplines as much as the Yorùbá. Their physical environment, history, mythology, language, artistic traditions, thought systems, social and political institutions, religion, moral and aesthetic values, economic and medical systems in Africa and other important aspects of their lives have received numerous attentions. (Odusanya 1983:26)

According to Aderibugbe (2009), the Yorùbá people are also viewed from their development as one of the most advanced communities in West Africa. The ancestry of the Yoruba is mostly traced to a common progenitor known as Oduduwa and the people predominate south western. The prominence of the Yorùbá is evident in the continent as they are one of the largest tribes in Africa. It is held that there are about thirty million Yoruba throughout the region of Africa.

A number of traditions exists that show the historical origin of the Yorùbá (Idowu, 1996:4). Although like any indigenouse race, written records of the ancient past of the people are non-existent, their history have been preserved and passed down over many generations in the form of sayings, liturgies, songs, myths and philosophy. Several myths and legends credit the holy city, Ile-Ife, as the cradle of the Yorùbá from where the people dispersed to the different locations occupied now. (Adegbola, 1998). According to one of such traditions, Ile-Ife, their ancestral home was the place where God created man. There is no question about the homogeneous origin of the Yoruba as seen in the language which in spite of its many dialects provides the main evidence of a common origin and cultural heritage.

This heritage prominently features in Helen Labeodan's PhD thesis titled "Oṣi and Moral Responsibility in Yoruba belief" and her subsequent works are from the background of the religion and culture of the Yoruba.

In the thesis, which was done in her maiden name, Adetunji she examines the concept of *Orí* (a complex entity interpreted sometimes as destiny) from a soft deterministic approach (Adetunji, 2001:xiv, 215). According to Helen, a person's *Orí* can be altered by societal influences such as western education, foreign religions, western culture, western medical care and changes in economic system. Intrinsic values such as good character, offering of sacrifices, hard work and ability to struggle are free actions of an individual that can affect a person's life. Helen further posited that the Yorùbá strongly believe in human destiny because success or failure of anyone largely depends on the type of choice such has made in heaven, though human efforts cannot be ruled out, even though the greater part of it can be ascribed to destiny. (Adetunji, 2001:xiv, 215).

In Labeodan (2004:18-37) she did a critical appraisal of moral responsibility and punishment in the Yoruba society. In another work, Labeodan (2006:117-134) she posited that the concept of *Orí* stands for several concepts for the Yoruba; their philosophy, religious beliefs and practices. Helen highlighted the rationale for the choice of one's *Orí* or *Iwa* and concludes that the two play major roles in moral evaluation of an individual. Labeodan (2008:60-66) underscores the fact that the concept of immortality permeates every area of life of the Yoruba. It however notes that philosophy of hereafter acts as a check and balance on the way the people live their earthly life. Labeodan (2009:111-122) explains that destiny among the Yoruba is known to be always associated with *Orí*. The main trust of this work is that it highlights the ontological status of *Orí* which is a spiritual entity. The Yoruba see *Orí* as a guardian spirit hence the need why an individual must maintain a good *Orí* at all times.

Apart from Yoruba religion and culture, Christianity has also influenced some of Labeodan's inferences. She, like many Africans is a religious person. As popularly held, it is very rare to see an African who is an atheist even though this perception appears to be changing with the rise of modernity as people are beginning to embrace skepticism, agnosticism or atheism. This trend is still in the minority because majority of African are religious people, who also believe in the existence of God. As a Christian, her religious beliefs influence some of her works and she sometimes draw her inferences from this persuasion.

In Adebo and Labeodan (2012:49-71) some Christian inferences were drawn on the problem of evil and the nature of God based on open-theism. The article submits that the problem of evil does not limit God's foreknowledge, showing the failure of open-theism to the problem of evil. Labeodan (2014:37-50) explores the effects of terrorism on Christians in Northern Nigeria. It points out the factors responsible for religious based violence in Nigeria. It shows also how safety and well-being of Christians can be enhanced through religious dialogue.

### **The Sources of Helen A. Labeodan's Philosophical Propositions**

Evidently, Helen Labeodan being a Yoruba woman, Yoruba religion and culture both play huge roles in her works. Yoruba myths, proverbs, liturgies, songs and sayings of the people contributed immensely to her works. Labeodan is not an 'arm chair researcher' because she sourced directly for data to inform her findings and conclusions. Her passion for thorough research motivated her to go to the real source of information and most her works make use of primary data gathered through interview and observation methods. Her search for knowledge did not deter her from interviewing *babalawos* (traditional Yoruba priests) and other direct sources of information for her research. While narrating her experience during her PhD interview with me, Helen expressed her experience with a particular *babalawo*, who put an object on her forehead for a few seconds and told her, 'I can see that you are ready for knowledge'. This unabashed passion for knowledge and excellence is rare.

In Labeodan (2015:21-34) Yoruba proverbs form a huge source for her findings. Here, she examined gendered proverbs and the negative perspectives about women in terms of capacity, agency, and their trustworthiness. The focus of this work is reimagining African Womanhood via Yoruba proverbs. She also brought to the fore the fact that, Yoruba proverbs affirm the equality of men and women and also attests to the possibility of social and cultural reorientation and reimagining the status of the Yoruba woman through emphasis on empowering proverbs and doing away with the disempowering ones.

Another major source of her finding and the framework for some of her research is the practice of the Yoruba and use of personal stories. Yoruba practices are innumerable, some of her works are situated within cultural practices which are often times generally known. In some cases, she recounts some real-life experiences of women to inform her philosophical propositions. Such personal stories are powerful sources that people can readily relate to. Labeodan (2002:68-78) includes the stories of some women who experienced some appalling cultural practices in the name of widowhood rites. Helen cited, the story of a woman named Alero, a programmer in Lagos Nigeria, who upon the death of her husband was accused of his death and made to go through hell in the name of widowhood rites. She was kept in a hut for seven days, fed in broken plates, raped and thrown into a river to prove her innocence in the death of her husband. She survived it all but no doubt was plagued with this trauma for a long time. This approach is a powerful way of passing a message across because experiences of real-life people are involved.

Labeodan also makes use of classical philosophies by sometimes situating them within African worldviews especially Yoruba philosophy or engaging them on their own. In Labeodan (2008:47-57) she engaged St. Thomas Aquinas' mind and matter problem by averring that a person's mind and body influence one another. Her conclusion in this work calls for a good understanding of this truth of the relationship between the physical and non-physical parts of a human being for a better understanding of interpersonal relationship in human society.

The Ifa literary corpus forms a formidable source of information in her works. Her work Labeodan (2006:117-134) is rich in cultural songs, saying, stories and several verses of Odu- Ifa. She made use of some popular Odu Ifa such as Odu Ifa Ofun to explain the concept of *Ori* in her explanation of human destiny among the Yoruba. She also employed the Odu-Obara Oyeku to narrate the story of a man who wanted to climb a coco- nut tree to the top, but was misled by pride, though destined to accomplish this feat, he did not yield to the warning of caution and while jumping from one tree to another, fell and died. This was used to teach the virtue of *suuru* (patience) and the relationship between *Ori*-destiny and *Iwa*-character.



Written records are also important sources for Labeodan's works especially in studies that focus on non-cultural matters of great importance such as those related to HIV and AIDS. She engages written records such as published reports, records, contemporary newspapers, magazines and journals related to her particular object of study. Written records play a huge role in Labeodan (2005:28-36) and Labeodan (2009:111-122) among other works.

Notably, her works also ride on the shoulders of other great women like M. Oduyoye, M.J. Masenya, M.R.A. Kanyoro, M.W. Dube, B.M. Monoham, P.N. Mwaura, D. Akintunde, B. Awe and a host of others as the convictions of these matriarchs have also influenced her thoughts. She makes references to these giants in her research as she refers to their written works and sometimes also her personal discussions with some of them.

### **Philosophical Propositions of Helen A. Labeodan which Addressed Patriarchy and Wrong Interpretations of African Philosophy**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Helen A. Labeodan is an African woman and philosopher who carries the burden of bequeathing a liberating theology to the core and this passion is very obvious in her works. To this end, most of her works show her quest for the liberation of the black woman. Labeodan (2002:68-78) "Beyond Critique: A Philosophical Appraisal of Some Cultural Practices" is a masterpiece in addressing patriarchy. This work also showcases her quest for the liberation of the black woman in the area of some cultural practices such as female gender mutilation and harmful widowhood rites, to achieve this, she made three succinct points:

- Attitudes towards women need changing which is not by the passing of legislation by law makers but its forceful implementation;
- and Constructive leadership determined to improve women lot and self-esteem;
- and the problem of ignorance of women who are brainwashed by custom.

Thankfully, the rate of female gender mutilation is reducing, whereas the practice of harmful widowhood rites is not. According to Labeodan, female gender mutilation is part of the rites of passage and it was also done due to the belief that female circumcision will reduce promiscuity. These bases are most times counter-productive because once sexual parts that give pleasure have been removed, the lady will become promiscuous in the search for sexual satisfaction, thereby jettisoning the logic for the practice. In Adetunji (2001:103-112), Labeodan was emphatic in articulating her anger and displeasure towards oppression of women by cultural beliefs and practices, her words are as follows: “The African woman has to discard the negative beliefs about life and about herself which she has been made to live with. For instance, she has been made to channel her thinking, her attitude, her habits and activities towards preparing herself for a man”. (Adetunji, 2001:103)

Helen Labeodan also addressed patriarchy and wrong interpretation of African philosophy by doing a historical comparison of eras and highlighting the basis for wrong juxtaposing of cultures or cultural hegemony. According to her, in pre-colonial African societies, women were powerful and played active roles in governance and other spheres of life, they were not seen as the weaker sex, neither were they being hostile to. (Adetunji, 2001) She mentioned great African women like Iyalode Efunsetan, Omu Okwei, other great historic African women and the roles women played in the famous Aba riot to make her point.

This positive experience of women was disrupted by the arrival of the colonial masters, who came from a patriarchal society that paid little attention to women and believed them to be suitable at best for the support of male roles. Their women were seen but not heard, this was not found in Yoruba culture and unfortunately this foreign culture infiltrated the worldviews of the people. Obviously, it cannot be asserted that precolonial Africa was totally free from patriarchy, but women still had a voice especially in matriarchal set up. They were allowed room to contribute their quota in governance, economy, religion, politics and other spheres before they were stripped of this opportunity in the wake of colonialism.

In order to propound ways forward for the African woman liberation, Helen identified the following points, which are powerful tools in the hands of women:

that there is need for a change of mindset and thinking, because most women do not have self-worth and esteem. Not only that, there is fear of abandonment, because women are not raised to believe that they can take care of themselves, which is why most women stay in terrible marriages and relationships. Helen says:

Many women get hung up on the question: how can I fulfill myself without a man or without a child? This can be frightening thought for many women. There is need to acknowledge our fears and walk through them like the woman with the issue of blood. Luke 8:43. We should be determined like this woman and take our rightful place in the society. (Adetunji, 2001:107)

Since culture has been an effective weapon of patriarchy and subjugation of women, Labeodan approached culture from a critical point of view (Adetunji, 2001:103-112). Women have been perpetually kept in bondage from cradle, that is, from the home, the area of education, public treatment, in religious spaces and to virtually all areas of living. The excuse, is usually, this is how it is done and women are expected to be treated in a certain way, made to occupy certain positions or not to. Labeodan held assertively that the African woman should develop her own philosophy of life (2001:103-112). The use of singular pronoun “her” here is brilliant and very pungent because human beings are peculiar and our stories differ, our strengths and weaknesses are not the same. What works for Angela may not work for Elizabeth. Each woman should develop her own philosophy of life. Helen submitted further that after adopting the personal philosophy of life, certain actions must follow, thus, she unfolds her liberating theology as follows: that belief systems embraced from childhood that have enslaved women should be discarded, women should support other fellow women, and women should ensure that they raise their sons well that they should respect one another irrespective of gender since a mother has a lot of influence on a child more than anyone else, female children should not be raised as inferior to boys in households, rather they should be raised to understand that they have dignity and worth as people created in the image of God. Also, girls should be taught

to speak up whenever they are abused regardless of the status of the offender and that women must refuse to be silent over any form of sexual harassment. (Adetunji, 2001)

Labeodan's position on patriarchy is very apparent in her works, her passion is contagious and her anger on the unfair treatment of women is palpable from her words. Identifying the main purpose of her theology is necessary in order to appreciate her contributions to scholarship as an African woman philosopher.

## Purpose of Labeodan's Theology

A hasty study of Labeodan's works may reveal several interests and wrong conclusion that her research interests revolve only around philosophy, gender, Yoruba culture and belief systems, HIV/AIDS and other similar themes. This hasty conclusion is driven by the expectations from her position as a Professor of Philosophy of Religion, pedigree, education and other factors expected to have influenced her worldviews. This is only a tiny and somewhat incomplete analysis of the purpose of her works and her research interests. A closer scrutiny of her works show that she is driven by a passion to interpret and re-interpret African Philosophy and cultural beliefs through feminist lens. That is, she has engaged African philosophy and cultural beliefs from the feminine perspective. This is different from the masculine-coloured philosophy or the Western influenced idea of feminism. Her works show her interests in issues that agitate the mind of the person, which hitherto are seen as mysteries beyond human comprehension such as, *Iwa* (character), womanhood, inner being, mind, matter and altruism. Contrary to the erroneous belief that Africans do not have a philosophy of religion her publications have revealed that fertile topics worthy of philosophical discourse are enshrined in African thought system.

Another main purpose of most of her works is to help the African woman develop her inner self worth and self-esteem. In Adetunji (2001:103-112), Labeodan asserted that her research is aimed at offering encouragement to the African woman on how she can improve her lot by looking at herself as an individual and not in relationship to a man. She held further in her bid to re-orientate African women that everywoman

should be financially independent. This is very necessary as many women live miserable lives because they cannot take care of themselves and their children, especially at the death of their husbands or the basis for remaining in abusive marriages.

On the issue of submission, Labeodan in Adetunji (2001:103-112) held that women should re-identify themselves and get out of all aspects of culture and religion which continue to hold women down. It is important for women to let go of the attitude of being dependent which is as a result of fear, women should let go of this attitude. Women should also identify and belong to support groups which could be a casual get-together of friends.

Another key purpose of her research is situating a global problem such as HIV/AIDS and terrorism within socio-cultural context, especially their impacts on women. Labeodan (2005:23-36) focuses on cultural practices such as polygamy and female circumcision that put people, especially women at the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Similarly, in Labeodan (2009:131-143) her focus is the role of the church, specifically the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) in prevention and management of HIV and AIDS and problem of stigmatisation associated with it through holistic teaching of sex ethics accompanied with humanitarian services to people living with HIV and AIDS most especially within the Church. Labeodan (2015:349-360) advocates coordinated political intervention to confront issues such as the girls' kidnapping and creating a safe space for the girl child.

## CONCLUSION

Prof. Helen Adekunbi Labeodan nee Adetunji is a quintessential scholar and her personal convictions drive her research. As a philosopher, she has a critical mind, this makes her work question some ideas that we live by, especially those that concern women. She believes that culture can be challenged and the fact that cultural practices have been done from one generation to another does not mean they cannot be queried. Her philosophy of religion shows that rational investigations of religious traditions could be engaged to address issues that affect the everyday living of human beings. This engagement is evident in several of her works.

Helen Labeodan is a matriarch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Her contributions to the vision of circle is prodigious making her worthy of emulation. She is truly concerned that theologizing is not solely a masculine affair neither should religion nor culture be used as tools for oppressing women. She believes that culture is dynamic, thus it should not be approached with a static or lethargic mindset. Her engagement of African world views and philosophy accentuate her inclination for their interpretations and re-interpretations since cultural experiences undergo a continuous process of change. Contrary to erroneous beliefs, Africans do have philosophy of religion, otherwise there will not have been a basis for her works.

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