



17 | HÉLÈNE YINDA'S AFRICAN FEMINIST APPROACH TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Hélène Yinda, a matriarch from French speaking Cameroon, advocates for the liberation of African women with succinct evidence why they deserve a Nobel peace prize as opposed to other continents. She argues that sexual difference promotes women's human rights and liberates their creative energy in the context of hegemonic masculinity. According to Yinda, before the spread of the gospel in Africa, Africa had their own indigenous cultures, lifestyle and hospitality. Although the Christian gospel is perceived to have originated from the West, it was not an ideology to be imposed on Africans. The use of the African feminist theoretical framework of inclusiveness, collaboration and negotiation will be used to explain her quest for an ecumenical movement to transform the world. As such, Christians should be united to accept difference. The concept of difference and ecumenism educates people to be creative, thoughtful, reflective and imagine initiatives to liberate themselves from crisis - achievable only through a grand world movement willing to help local institutions. The bottom line is that this new gospel or ecumenism must not lose sight of Africa's contribution. Furthermore, Hélène Yinda advocates for the eradication of gender inequalities, such as gender-based violence, injustices, stereotypes, prejudices against African women and traditions, which degrades and enslaves women due to ignorance and fear. This research is historical, descriptive and qualitative and will answer the following questions: How has Hélène Yinda's research changed African theology, address feminism and improve on the rights of African women? What are the cultural and religious context that motivates her works? What are the sources of her findings, which led to her quest for ecumenism and gender equality? These and other similar questions will be answered with the view of unfolding a liberating theology of the French Speaking Matriarch- Hélène Yinda.

Keywords: Hélène Yinda, Feminist approach, Liberation theology, African feminism, Matriarch, Cameroon

Introduction

Dr. Hélène Yinda is a powerful and assertive figure in Francophone Africa, reflected in the leadership disintegration in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) after the 2007 Pan-African meeting that took place in Cameroon. According to Helen Labeodan (2016), it was at the Cameroon meeting, that most French-speaking members left the Circle and probably some of the sponsors as well. The Cameroonian experience highlights the personality of Matriarch Helene Yinda, who would have risen to the rank of general coordinator if given a chance as an active Francophone. Her popularity amongst French-speaking Cameroonians shows that she has the capacity of bringing back the fallen members and sponsors if the Circle gives her a chance. Researching on Yinda is of essence because Maponda (2016:1) had – projected this in his book when he emphasized the need for great personalities of the Circle from English and French zone with revolutionary ideologies to be highlighted if Africa must be transformed. Hélène Yinda, demystifies the scientific approach of the Holy scriptures because all those approaches hide the fact that the Word of God is first of all a word of Life, a shared word, a word for an existential conversion with values of love, mercy, generosity and sharing. Without contesting the importance of solid theological training, in order to avoid the rise of dictatorial ignorance and the male exigence to maintain women in low educational levels, attitudes that Hélène Yinda strongly denounces (Yinda and Mana, 2005:41).

Biography of Hélène Yinda

Mbenda Ngo Hélène Yinda is a preacher, an African theologian and an orphan, born in Cameroon from the Bassa ethnic group. She did her primary and secondary education in Cameroon, between 1991 and 1995. She obtained her first degree and a Master's degree in Theology at the Faculty of Theology in Yaounde with an option in African religion. She is an advocate for the liberation of African women through the action of the Afrique et Moyen Orient de l'Alliance Mondiale des Unions Chrétiennes Feminines translated 'World Alliance of Women's Christian Unions' (YWCA – Geneva), and the Director of the Department of Africa and the Middle East. She was the coordinator of the French – speaking

wing of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She was previously the head of the Women's Department of the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church and a member of the General Committee of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). She also obtained her doctorate in Feminist Theology from Theological Seminary in San Francisco in California, USA in 2014.

In the area of Theology, she is engaged in the construction of an African feminist theology through colloquiums, workshops, and seminars. Some examples are Addis Ababa 2002, Poto Novo in Benin 2003. She is an advocate on women and development, the church and the society, a militant on liberation theology, liberation of women from inhuman traditional practices, and interpretation of Biblical text. Yinda also advocates for the liberation of women from oppression, servitude, male domination and patriarchy so that men and women can give birth to a new humanity – revolutionary theology.

She has written a number of books alone and in collaboration with other authors. For example, she wrote a number of books with Ka Mana such as: "for the New Theology of African Women", Rethinking Sexual Difference, Promoting Women's rights and freeing their creative energies (Editions CLE – CIPCRE 2001). Mana and Yinda discuss the destiny, hope, experiences of African women and all the struggles they are engaged with for the recognition of their rights, liberty, and their dignity for being Africans today (CIPCRE 2001). Yinda also wrote the preface of a book written by three authors Ka Mana, Marcellin Setondji Doussou and Jean-Blaise Kenmogne entitled the message of HIV/ AIDS in Africa which highlights her interest in women's sexuality. Yinda is astute, assiduous and possess the leadership skills of a general coordinator of the Circle as per the French-speaking members who wanted to do justice with multilingualism in the Circle. Given that, when the circle was created, Musimbi Kanyaro was the first English-speaking general coordinator from Kenya and in 2002, Isabel Phiri from Malawi became the second general coordinator still from an English-speaking nation.

It was therefore expected that in the Cameroonian meeting the next general coordinator should be French-speaking which never materialized, instead Falato Moyo was elected from an English-speaking country

and institution like her predecessor despite the fact that the circle is multilingual. Hence it is expected that other linguistic groups should be given a chance at being the general coordinator. Hence at the Cameroon meeting the French-speaking members were unhappy with the re-election of another English-speaking coordinator. Most Circle sisters thought Hélène Yinda, the Francophone coordinator, should have been given a chance at this meeting. She has been faithful and committed to the issues of the Circle, given that she was doing all the French translation of the Circle with the help of able assistants (Labeodan, 2016:5).

Methodology

This research is historical, descriptive and qualitative in nature. It was principally a desktop review with secondary data from books, articles and reviews with other authors.

Culture, Religion and Liberation Theology

Modern evangelization must be rooted in ecumenism, in the church and if possible, in a small community as cardinal Malula wanted. In communion with all the Christian churches, hence the importance of the ecumenical movements to transform the world. To Yinda, when Christians are divided it is a scandal. Christians should come together by accepting differences (see religious pluralism). The author nevertheless criticizes the “spiritual” communities where one is content to pray while asking for miracles and the coming of the Spirit. Instead, the people should be taught to create, to think, to reflect and to imagine initiatives for ways out of the crisis – the vision of ecumenism. To Yinda, ecumenism is premised on the achievement of a great global construction movement set up to help in building local forces. In the course of this new evangelization, African values and contributions must be interwoven to Christianity. Sharing in a community spirit (Yinda, 2007).

Culture is both oppressive and liberating (Kanyoro in Labeodan, 2016:6). Yinda and Mana condemn sexual harassment in the workplace especially about what happens amongst secretaries and the army. These authors decry the fact that there is extreme sexual violence against

women despite the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. There is also violence propagated by women themselves – widowhood. The authors further decry levirate marriage, a practice which had a good justification in the pre-colonial era because families did not want to leave the woman of the deceased in absolute distress. Someone was therefore chosen from the family to take charge of the widowhood. However, this is not the case today where there is male domination on women in Africa (Yinda and Mana, 2001).

The above authors also decry other sexuality issues in Africa like Female circumcision/ Female Genital Mutilation and polygamy which subordinate women and argued that polygamy has lost its significance in Africa. The authors narrated what polygamy used to be from the perspective of their grandfather who practiced it with wisdom and in an organized system and not the “bureaugamie” that exist today. Polygamy is now associated to a man with several offices. It has become a system of pleasure and that is what the authors are questioning. A society where husbands and wives give no attention to their relationship. Giving the fact that African women constitute a great social force for transformation today, be it the church, civil society, politics, associations, they have the potential to bring change in Africa and that is all there is for Africa’s future. The challenge is that African women should have it in mind that they are at the center of the revolution to reconstruct Africa.

All of the above has a spiritual dimension. It is in looking at the gospel that we see the liberation practice of Jesus. The Bible is a revolutionary book. The first thing the Bible illuminates is that man is given free choice. Eve ate this mysterious fruit so that man becomes free and take responsibility and to leave Paradise that God ordained for man. Secondly, is when God sent a savior to humanity. It is important that God passed through woman to bring the spirit Savior. The choice of a woman is not invisible in God’s vision and for women today. Thirdly, it was women who first testified about the resurrection of Jesus that has transformed the destiny of humanity. It shows that women played a dynamic revolutionary role in God’s vision (Mana & Yinda, 2001).

Women theologians make theology through their social experiences, cultures and religions, depending on whether they are Christian, Muslim, Jew or animist. Bernadette Mbuyi-Beya in her co-authored work with

Yinda, argues that women theologians believe in a particular God's word for women and they stand by it to proclaim freedom and renew their experience with God, but not a way to reject classical theology. They talk of contextual theology which is also the argument of African feminist (see the section of African feminist theoretical framework below) (Yinda and Mbuyi-Beya, 2007:163-164). In my opinion, there can never be a homogeneous/universal voice but multiple voices based on their daily experience in Africa and with God.

Maponda (2016:2) reports that at the heart of the Circle of Concerned Women theologians, Helene Yinda made preaching and biblical studies an opportunity to talk about existential problems, with new instruments of popular reading different from scientific reading. In her book, *Women in Africa*, Yinda fosters her liberation theology to bring the gospel as a new speech to men and women in churches. She opened a school for women in Yaounde, Cameroon, the school specifically links theology and life, biblical reading and concrete problems. The objective is to find in the Word of God the base of relief and the power to face difficult situations of life.

The opening of this school erases the notion that theology can only be done inside classical higher institutions with university criteria. Yinda also reports the analogy of Togolese theologian Kasa Dovi, who postulates women's main fight based on the review of Paul's letters related to women's situation, while the Cameroonian theologian Louise Tappa denounces the lies about a patriarchal reading of the bible from Adam, the man from whom women's inferiority is sacralised because she introduced the sin into the world (Yinda, 2002:54). Her liberation theology goes beyond academia and embraces the demystification of scientific theology and engenders a real popular and lively theology – an important impact of the Circle in the French-speaking zone.

Yinda & Mana (2005:41), question the life of African women before and after Christianity in their book "for the new theology of African women". In this book, there was gender division of labour where men and women had their own roles to play. As such, Coquery-Vidrovitch in (Yinda & Mana, 2005) admitted that there was almost nothing about the precolonial feminine universe which emerged with colonialism. It became doubtful whether the arrival of the missionaries change the lives of

women for the better or for the worse. There was a conception of female dependence as strong in Africa as there was in Europe a certain Christian legal vision of male domination. It is clear that in Africa, the problems for women are expected to free themselves from all the cultural atavisms which are responsible for the customs still lived today. The catalogue of such customs which range from widowhood rites to inheritance systems, from female circumcision to early marriage would take a long time to do.

From the moment when Christ is announced as the way of the human being and the measure of all things, neither the ancestral traditions of Africa nor the culture of the missionaries can any longer be lived as before. A new destiny begins...; with Christ nothing would be as before. The woman burst onto the religious scene (Yinda & Mana, 2005:54-55). Yinda's research has also influenced feminism and improved on the rights of African women in several ways. For instance, in her book "the Theology of creative femininity" she analyses five principles for a theology of creative femininity in Africa as follows:

1. When the spirit of God fertilizes a woman, the destiny of the world changes from top to bottom. The author gives an example of Kimpa Vita also known by her Portuguese name Dona Beatriz who lived in the 17th century (1684-1706) in the Kingdom of Congo (Northern Angola). Kimpa Vita was a Congo prophetess, founder and leader of the Antonialist movement, a form of syncretism between Catholicism and traditional religions of Congo. She fought for reunification of the Kongo kingdom plagued by Portuguese anarchy. She was caught by the Capuchins, condemned to the Stake and died, burned alive by the order of King Dom Pedro IV on July 2, 1706. From her youth, Kimpa Vita was recognized as "nyanga marinda", an intermediary between men and the world of the spirits (Yinda in Ngongo, 2015:46) She was initiated into the secret society known as "Kimpasi". The Kimpasi society had a mission to deliver people from evil forces through exorcism ceremonies called "mbumba kindonga". Vita was influenced by the prophecies of Appotonia Mafuta "Fumaria", who announces a divine punishment and walks with a stone which she presents as the head of Christ deformed by the wickedness of men (Kabwita, 2004 in Yinda & Mana, 2016). From 1703 – 1704, Kimpa Vita claimed to have

received revelations and announced that God will punish the inhabitants of the kingdom if the latter is not reunited, with Sao Salvador as its capital. It also teaches that the white missionaries distorted the divine message to deceive the black population (Yinda & Mana, 2016).

In an attempt to contextualize Jesus in Africa, Kimpa Vita taught that Jesus, his apostles and many biblical characters are black and are mostly Bisi Kongo (the true chosen people). That the real Holy Land is the Kongo and at the same time identifies Sao Salvador as the heavenly Jerusalem and announces that King Antoine (Nkanga in Kikongo) must be considered a messiah (Yinda in Ngongo, 2015). It is also claimed that Kimpa died every Friday and resurrected every Sunday, after spending two days conversing with God. Her movement is called Antonian or Antonianist. She recognized the authority of the pope but hostile to European missionaries, mainly active on the atlantics coast. Peter IV warned against the success of Antonianist movement, ended up having her arrested and condemned to the stake with her child, after a heresy trial before the civil court advised by the capuchin missionaries Bernardo da Gallo and Lorenzo da Lucca (JeuneAfrique.com 2018).

Kimpa Vita fought for the unity and reunification of Kongo dia Ntolila which was ravaged by a war that lasted 40 years and she also campaigned against Portuguese colonization and also the slave trade. Yinda like Vita is a figure of nationalism and anti-colonialism. Her action benefited Mvemba Aqua Rosasa king of Kongo who will be at the origin of the reunification of the kingdom. Hélène Yinda's illustration above demonstrates her liberation theology and African feminist thinking in Kumpa Vita who defied imperialism and believed in herself and the African god. In her case, the politics of naming invented by African feminist to shy away from the terminology feminism was not necessary. What is at stake is the issue of agency, subjectivity and power – the power to name oneself, one's location and one's struggle is key carefully adopted by Vita who renamed her own god. Writing about Kumpa Vita indicates Yinda's agreement with Nnaemeka (2001) assertion that there is and must be a diversity of feminisms (theology), responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women (men), and defined by them for themselves [not a universality of one God].

2. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, she gives birth to the son of God. It was Mary of Nazareth obviously but also Marie Mvila wife of the prophet Simon Kimbangu.
3. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, it is for the birth of a united world...a world of love, this "essential of the essential" by which Christ defined the first and greatest commandments.
4. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, the resurrection of society is a stake ...it is through women that the disciples understand that Christ is risen.

They are African women who founded 'the Circle of African theologians' and who wrote the book "the will to arise" "The will to stand up". The will to arise: women, tradition and the church in Africa by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (editor) and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro. What is the reality of being African woman and Christian? In this collection of original essays, African women theologians write about the life and dreams, the sorrows and joys of African women in a continent where religion shapes the whole of life. The first and second part of the book describes the role of women in terms of culture, rites of passage and daily life. Attitudes towards birthing and naming, marriage and widowhood, polygamy and prostitution and death are all explored. The third part focuses on the church, reviewing biblical attitudes toward women, and showing how African women can and should contribute to the life of the Christian church.

5. When the spirit of God fertilizes the woman, the mission of the woman becomes a fight for freedom. So be they!

In the book meeting between two cultures that have become pagan by Cheza and Guanst, Helene Yinda writes that with the arrival of the gospel in Africa, these are two paganized cultures that clashed. To Yinda, Africans exalt life, the joy of living, hospitality but the fear of invisible spirits have blurred this culture of life and paganized it. In Africa the values of life so much vaunted by the thinkers of Africa were weighed down by enormous powers of the invisible (Cheza and Guanst, n.d:126). Westerners preached the gospel but they forgot that this gospel was "good news" and not an ideology to be imposed by force.

In the theology of creative femininity with Ka Mana, Yinda observes the deep Neopaganism of contemporary civilization. It is therefore Christians who have become pagans, individualists, selfish, dominators who arrive in Africa. Moreover, by insisting on the individualist principles of personal conversion and personal salvation, he broke the community authority of the African spirit and finally all cultures come together and become pagan. The world culture today is structured outside the gospel and it is imperative to evangelize this culture. In this new culture, money has taken the place of the father, individualism has taken the place of the son and obsession with power has taken the place of the Holy Ghost.

African feminist perspective/ theoretical framework

African feminist Charter define their work as investing individual and institutional energies in the struggle against all forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation. Not different from bell Hooks definition as a movement to end all forms of sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. African feminisms, in their definitive plurality offer to speak of feminism from an African cultural perspective, an African geo-political location, and an African ideological viewpoint (Nkealah, 2016:62). When African feminist name themselves as feminists, they politicize the struggle for women's rights and question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multitude and varied identities as African feminists. The focus is on the lives of African women on the continent/environment.

Our feminism must share with the global feminist movement, the commitment to dismantle patriarchy in all its manifestations particularly on the African continent – the mindset of Hélène Yinda. African feminism is not confrontational, rather it is a feminism of cooperation/negotiation, compromise, accommodation which does not exclude men, a feminism of no egos – “nego-feminism” (Nnaemeka, 2001:319). This stance challenges men “to be aware of certain aspects of women's subjugation because African women and men are united in a common struggle against their dehumanization through colonialism, western hegemony and racism. As such African women are doubly oppressed, hence African feminists are committed to two struggles: the struggle for empowerment

of African women and the fight for the decolonizing of African societies, and overshadowing of African knowledge and narratives (Nnaemeka in Dosekun, 2021:54).

African feminism demands the interrogation of cultural assumptions (decoloniality), recognizing that historical and socio-political events which contributed to and continue to compound the perception of African womanhood and gender inequalities on the continent. They reject western conceptualizations of what African womanhood/gender constructs entail, as well as western/colonial methods to perceiving, interrogating and countering gender inequalities on the continent, asserting the inadequacy of western feminism to address the unique problems of African women. Demand for African-centered analysis of African societies and issues which respects African culture enough to retain what is of value/non-harmful to African women yet reject those aspects that work to their detriment.

This theory clearly fits Yinda's liberation theology, given that, Amina Mama differentiates feminism from what she calls "femocracy" referring to the popular struggle for African women for their liberation from the various forms of oppression they endure (Dosekun, 2021:54). Yinda's quest for a liberation theology and gender equality also evokes transnational feminism which is inspired by a feminist tradition of collaboration that is defining characteristics of black women's public and private lives throughout the world and brings women together as builders of communities and as creators of knowledge. Collaborative and communal work in the name of freedom, creative expression, and justice is a core theme in histories of women in Africa and the African diaspora (Rodriguez, Tsikata & Ampofo, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The writings of Hélène Yinda qualify and depict her as a matriarch, an African feminist and a theological and liberation theologian in her quest for gender equality and evangelical/ religious contextualization if Africa must be transformed. According to this author, ecumenism, collaboration, solidarity and negotiation propels true gospel for transformation that the world needs and not individualism which is far from the original

conceptualization of the gospel. To achieve the latter, imperialism/colonialism must be eradicated and Africa's contribution taken into account as well as women's perspective.

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