



12 | **SR ROSEMARY EDET NKOYO: SHIFTING NEW THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS FOR WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN SOCIETY AND AFRICAN CHURCH**

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Abstract

The Catholic co-founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Sr. Rosemary Edet HHJC could be seen as one of the first African Catholic Feminist Nuns. As a biblical theologian she articulates African tradition(s) and biblical interpretations. Edet has developed a theology of inculturation which tries to give back women's place to them, especially African women, within Christianity and the traditional Nigerian culture(s). Her two main concerns were: how can African women regain a new understanding of their role, dignity and place in the Church and Society after colonization; and the first evangelization in most West African countries. This is because these two events have reenforced the patriarchal pattern that already shaped some or most African traditional societies. Edet's perspectives and responses based on a constructive dialogue between the Bible and the Nigerian (traditional and modern) cultures, elaborate a new standard for women through an interpretation of the concept of community which gives a new insight of the domestic ritual and daily women's life as a locus theologicus. She advocates for a positive and authentic place of the women in the traditional settings, which could help to define the place and the role of women in the Church. She thus opens a path for other women in African feminist liberation theology. Using her publications as a basis, this chapter will present her theological journey about the liberation of the Nigerian women by shifting this liberation theology and its reception and how these echoes by her contemporaneous colleague Elisabeth Moltmann.

Prologue

Rosemary Edet (1988:3) writes that “the situation of women and the nature of Christianity in Africa are both shaped by histories and culture that are molding contemporary Africa.” This statement expresses her concern

as an African woman theologian: how the Evangelical could transform society and the Church and let the liberation be a reality for all, particularly for Women?

Holding her charges in her community, Edet did not stop her work as an academic and researcher. In fact, she was very consistent in her ways, a consistent Religious and a consistent academic. As a researcher she remained committed to her work as a teacher. Her commitment led her to question the role of women in the Church as a catholic nun also just as women in the society.

Edet chose to find the answer through the analysis of the traditional Nigerian society and the study of the scripture. In fact, born and raised in a traditional family (Udoidem, 2011), she knew from the interior the Church, society and how the challenges could be like. She proposed a new paradigm of community that could help to see women as a full part of the church and society. Actually, Sr Rosemary did her doctoral studies in Religious Studies with a dissertation on *The Resilience of Religious Tradition in the Drama of Wole Soyinka and James Ene Henshaw*. Her studies of the religious traditions in the New Testament seem to have preoccupied her as a New Testament scholar at the University of Calabar. Among the themes in New Testament studies, one of those that concerned her most was the Pauline notion of community (Udoidem, 2011).

Enhanced with the most accessible and available of her publications,¹ our contribution will describe the context that shaped the reflections of Edet and how this opened the path echoed in the feminist liberation theology.

Doing Theology in Nigeria: Challenges and Chances

In the late 60s the Roman Catholic Church began a huge worldwide reform through the Vatican II. It started a long movement that lasts till today. This new understanding of the Church had opened a path for a

¹ During her life, Sr Rosemary published a few articles in the beginning of the Circle and the EATWOT. Unfortunately, the publication in Nigeria didn't get a good audience which made an access to her works and her legacy very difficult.

reflection about new roles and new challenges for African women, particularly the Nigerians. This Reform took place during the earlier independence time of most African countries. Hence, the building of free society after years of colonisation also brings with it many challenges. One question is how to find a new relation with traditional culture? How would it be possible to articulate Christianity and traditional praxis of the culture? How could women find their place in this new situation of the Church?

These are the leading questions of Edet in this new social and church context. So, the first step is to understand what this context is.

The women in traditional Cultural and Socio-Political Context of Nigeria

Like most of the African countries in the first years after independence, Nigeria was under military government in a political environment frame by ethnical identities. All these groups work to maintain the privileges and the rights due to their identity. Even if the colonization was over, Africa remained in a new form of slavery and colonization in their native country. Beside this one, the traditional context was reinforcing the colonization that frame a particular place for the women.

The Nigerian traditional society could be described as a patriarchal one. In this context, women receive their identities and roles only as wife and mother but not as a person of their own. The strength bond between women and their men and children becomes a chain for the women. The patriarchal organisation gives no place and no chance to the woman, Edet wrote:

In most Africa women are still the property of the men who father them or marry them. In some societies it is the uncle who holds sway over a woman's life. It makes little difference. Any talk of women's liberation is met with cynicism, hostility, or ridicule. A woman who has a vision concerning her life that contradict the traditional role the male-dominate society has laid down for her pays a terrible price for daring to pursue that vision (Edet, 1998:6).

This statement makes obvious how the position of women is under an oppressive structure that does not favour their freedom and empowerment. Unfortunately, this structure of the traditional society is also found in the Church even if the things are bringing on a change.

The Post-Council-Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria

The 2nd Vatican Council (1965-1968) called the “aggiornamento” bring a new shift in the whole catholic Church. The new understanding² of the Church as a People of God also brings a new understanding of the place of the lay people, particularly the place of women.

The Nigeria Church sees in this new situation the possibility of new challenges and new roles for African women. In a paper published after the EATWOT³ Conference of Mexico in 1986, Edet recognized how the Church provides a new collaboration between men and women, lay people and clerics were having part to mission of God. This new understanding of their role also brings a new understanding of the Church itself which becomes the centre and not the pastors.

With this news, the lateral ministries, mostly held by women, take a new importance beside the organized church as ministries of love commitment. Moreover, the charge of teaching and healing could also be shared by women, role formerly reserved for males due to organisation and structure of the Church, particularly the Catholic Church.

Through the new understanding of the Church, the notion of community and the role of women in Churches and society receive a new understanding that opens a liberation path for them.

² The Roman Catholic Church understood itself during a long time as the *Societa perfecta* where the hierarchy was at the first place. In the dogmatic constitution on the Church named after the two first words of the text (*Lumen Gentium*) and released by the Council we found a new definition of the Church as the People of God. With this definition it was no more the hierarchy, that means the bishops, the priest at the first place but the people of God, the Believers. That was a very important shift.

³ Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians founded in August 1976 in Dar-es-Saalam (Tanzania).

Suggesting New Paradigms in the African Theological Landscape

Nkoyoan Theology of Community

Gaining the new situation shift by council, it becomes important for Edet to develop a notion of community where all members have the same dignity and role. She states as follows:

The Christian Community, the Church originated from the assembled group of believers of the Christian Message announced by the disciples of Jesus of whom Paul was the foremost. At first these believers regarded themselves simply as Jews and those who heard their message also took them for such. But they also regarded themselves as the “elect of God,” “the holy people,” the Assembly of God. This community awareness constituted them into a new people of God, the new Israel, and so Paul in his letters addresses these Christian communities as “saints” – those determined by God’s saving act. The elected are therefore first and foremost holy, sanctified hence the holy people of God (Udoidem, 2011:5).

Edet’s description is not based on hierarchy or gender. It emphasizes three very distinct elements which are election, sanctification, and attention to one another. These three elements are therefore shared by all and are not the prerogative of any individual member(s) of the community. This concept of community thus understood, rejects any germ of domination by some over others and establishes a space of freedom in which all benefiting from the same call, and the same grace is at the service of the Gospel. In addition, it gives an important place to baptismal dignity, the source of community.

The understanding proposed by Edet shifts a new paradigm introduced by the 2nd Vatican Council. Moreover, she rooted her work in the Pauline heritage interpreted in the context of his communities and his different letters. In fact, Paul’s notion of communities does not know any discrimination, -whether it is red correctly- anyone who stands under the grace belongs to the community, that is why the constitutive notion of Edet of the elected possesses a high relevance. It is God who elects and sanctifies.

The constitutive concept of awareness brought by Edet takes on great signification in the African context. In fact, this element of belonging implies to be part of something greater as oneself. Therefore, it creates a binding force that we all belong to each other, the concept of “Ubuntu”.

By positing the principle of a community whose constitutive elements are neither gendered nor gotten by any merit, Edet gives herself the framework for thinking about the vocation of women for herself in God’s plan and for the consequences for the Church and society.

Women on the Side of God

Edet begins her reflection by observing traditional Nigerian society⁴, particularly that of her home region and then the Church. A main point of her research is how the rituals (puberty rites, childbirth, marriage and widowhood rites) undertaken by women should be revisited in the light of Christianity. She suggests that the effects of the rituals on African women be examined because: “Women’s ritual in Africa falls under ritual ideology which aims at controlling, in a conservative way the behaviour, the mood, the sentiment and the value of women for the sake of the community as a whole” (Edet, 1992:26). Therefore, as an important and necessary part of community life an individual, ritual should lead rather to the honour and empowerment instead of oppression of women.

If the ritual processes are such an important signification, that is because most of them are attached to the taboo of blood impurity, particularly those around puberty and birthing ritual. The relationship to blood, particularly to women, blood always make a great impression and involves fears. This fear is mostly developed by men and becomes a place of oppression and exclusion of women (although the situation is not a prerogative of African cultures). The rituals of puberty or childbirth⁵ will be the place to ward off those fears and draw a separation line between life and death, pure and impure and sacral and profane.

⁴ Even though Nigeria can be perceived as a country with different cultures and therefore of different social settings the expression Nigeria society would be used in singular duet to the existence of constants in the societies.

⁵ Unfortunately, it is impossible in the framework of this paper to develop all the rituals. Therefore, it would only focus on the main elements.

Facing this situation in the African culture Edet asks a new question in the light of a new understanding of these rituals: are they positive or negative? Are they oppressing or empowering women?

Her first review is to notice positive and negative aspects and how they both affect women. She writes:

The oppressive aspect of the childbirth ritual [...] imparts impurity and guilt to the act of bringing forth new life; it deprives the women of nutritious meals which they need after giving birth, and thus creates health hazard; the segregation deprives women of rights of movement and the ability to seek medical or other needed help and the rites create a sense of inferiority and self-depreciation – they subjugate women and deprive them of self-worth. (Edet, 1992:32)

The review of Edet shows how the negative aspects of rituals lie in a systematic and structural oppression. The denunciation operated by Edet unveils how under a cultural and sacred meaning rituals participated in a form of oppression. This oppression leads to death to the extent that these rituals deprive women of basic and vital care. It is a paradox that a place of life becomes a place of death. Nevertheless, it remains important for Edet to underline some positive aspects:

Childbirth rituals are occasions of thanksgiving, joy, and celebration, as the prayer during the rites indicates. This aspect of the ritual gives the mother a sense of accomplishment and inclusiveness. The mystery of giving birth is the woman's discovery that she is on that plane of life which amounts to a religious experience untranslatable in terms of masculine experience. (Edet, 1992:26).

In fact, it is noticeable that the celebration brings a recognition of this mystery which does not only belong to the woman, but she is the one who can do it. Edet underlines that the mystery resides in the "revelation of the feminine sacredness [which] is the mystic unity between life, woman, nature and the divinity." In other words, the rituals extract the woman from this oppressive situation and elevates her to the rank of co-creator with the divine, in this mystery of birth.⁶ Here, one might rightly ask whether that is not the motive of oppression? But the question of Edet

⁶ One could see there a seed for the feminist theology which could be very interesting to extend.

is how this ritual could fit within the Christian custom and open an avenue for society and particularly the Church.

In a context of inculturation and a faith rooted in the African culture, the positive aspect of the childbirth ritual revives the Christian practice of recognizing God as the creator of all things, more specifically of life itself. But even more, it opens a new perspective, according to Edet (1992), in the understanding of the ministries of the word and the sacraments. She expressed her position in the following terms: “This aspect of the ritual⁷ should be capitalized upon by Christianity through admission of the fact that women are God-bearers, and as such can be ministers of the word and sacraments. They are not inferior to men, neither are they impure when performing their natural God-given duty of birthing” (Edet, 1992:36). Two things we could understand from her submission are as follows: first, that even the Church of God puts the women in a situation of oppression by refusing them access to ministry; Second it is not the fact of giving birth that is the problem but the interpretation and the understanding, which by the way must be changed and transformed.

Speaking of transformation means that the maternal symbols have to be recognized, appreciated by society and the Church. Furthermore, it is vital for society to take the feminine experience into serious consideration in the building of the nation and church. This implies that Christian faith proclaims the human liberation, equality between men and women, therefore Christianity should not reinforce or legalize women’s oppression, instead it should practically emancipate them from adverse rituals. The Good News should be a liberation good news also for women. Edet proposes a new interpretation by debunking where this exclusion of women came from. She says: “The old adage that women should be seen and not be heard is taken over by the churches and given a biblical foundation in the first letter to the Corinthians. This also affects ecclesial structures so that women are excluded from the ordained ministry and administrative roles of the church and thus remain outsiders in the church” (Edet, 1992:36).

By denouncing the perverse structure of the rituals of traditional society Edet also highlights those of the Church that oppress women. In

⁷ Edet referred here to the celebration of the mother and her newborn.

this way, she can appeal to rediscover the goal of liberation that originates from the Gospel and the role of the Church to be an agent of this liberation of men and women. Moreover, it puts at the center an understanding of the celebration of the sacraments as ritual in their constitutive dimension in these terms: “The fact that the church has rites underscore the necessity of rituals in our lives. Rituals are the sacramental self-realization of the individual or the church and are indispensable. All the church’s rites of passage and its healing rites are rooted in the Scripture” (Edet 1992:36). It becomes clear that the Church has to incorporate the positives aspect of the traditional ritual, which would be an important act of inculturation but also of expression of liberation.

According to Edet, the path of liberation that is built through this act of inculturation must be understood as follows: “the whole rite should be that of thanksgiving and celebration during which our alienation from God, society, and self is acknowledged and even proclaimed. Thus, the bipolar tension of life is met by the simultaneous acceptance of wholeness and infirmity, deprivation and restoration, alienation and reconciliation” (Edet, 1992:36). Edet states that the reviewing of the childbirth ritual by the Church releases a saving and liberating power of Word of God. For Jesus the Christ, the Word of God reconciles us to the Father. So, in a context and praxis that rest on words and healing ministry, the Church by stopping harmful tradition establishes a place where the word of liberation is proclaimed. Furthermore, Jesus was the one who liberated the woman with blood issues, so he never tortured, excluded or segregated anyone.

In short, for Edet, by liberating women from degrading and segregating practices and recognizing this particular ministry of giving life, the Church rediscovers her primary vocation, that of proclaiming the Gospel of freedom and salvation. Edet thus challenges the Church in her responsibility towards the people of God in her struggle for liberation and salvation.

Putting the women by the side of God renews some conception of the Church. In fact, when the Church is designated as mother,⁸ she is called to fulfil this vocation for all her sons and daughters. It is a question of

⁸ The Roman Catholic Church Ecclesiology is very familiar with the expression: “*Ecclesia mater et magistra*” i.e. The Church is Mother and Teacher.

giving them freedom instead of establishing rules that exclude them. For her the Church must stand with her Children. In this light Edet stated:

The feeling of a share in divine activity should proceed from an encounter with the Word within the Church as a healing community and with its members as the bearers of the healing power. The minister within this context is a healer as bearer of the Word. The Word is also in the mother and in all women members of the church as priestly, kingly, and prophetic people; therefore, there should be women ministers, women who have actually experienced and shared in the divine activity of creation (Edet, 1992:37).

By this statement, Edet gives a great foundation which could be pleading for more recognized women's ministry.⁹ Edet's commitment to women's recognition in the church and society did not only play a role for the African Church. Some seeds find and echoes, even years later in a development of some feminist theology and Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann is one of the figures.

A Legacy in Discussion with the Echoes of Sr Edet in Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann

Sister Edet's reflection can be echoed with that proposed by Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann. Although Edet does not develop a Christology or a soteriology of liberation, the displacement she suggests induces a Christological reflection proposed by Wendel-Moltmann, who acknowledges the receipt from the work of the Women's Conference of the EATWOT.¹⁰

For Wendel-Moltmann (2010), talking about the childbirth ritual, giving birth, or natality, puts a focus on the very existential dimension of humanity. The fact of being born has been forgotten by theology. The gaze and practice consisting only of thinking about purifying the woman from her impurity. But the stakes here are greater in so far as what we

⁹ It matters to underline here how far and avant-gardist this statement is for a roman catholic nun after the Council. The women ministry in the Roman Catholic Church is till today a shibboleth even if there is an ongoing discussion about it.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Wendel-Moltmann was a German feminist theologian, one of the first of her generation.

can and must find is the incarnated dimension of our existence and, above all, the central place of the corporeality.

According to Wendel-Moltmann, it is not just about rediscovering the centrality of our body, but also to rediscover Jesus as the birthed one. This means that natality was never an important part in the theology. It does not play a role because as we have already noticed, it is always linked with impurity. The focus on the impurity of women during childbirth has caused the entire theology to lose sight of what the incarnation of Christ might mean. Because there is no incarnation without a birth and talking about birth leads to looking positively at the woman and all that surrounds this wonderful moment. But even more, Wendel-Moltmann's resumption of the struggle of African women is to "deconstruct rational theology, which devalues the physical life and more particularly the body and sexuality of women." (Wendel-Moltmann, 2010) shows us to what extent the problem is not only in Africa but also in the whole Church.

As Wendel-Moltmann noticed, the incarnation of Jesus is neither just a moment of the history nor a myth. It tells us that Jesus is a man who is born, who grows up and moreover as Edet says, he was revolutionary. According to Edet, his incarnate experience made him close to the widow, the hemorrhoid woman and all other women in distress. He did not torture or segregate them or ask for any purification ritual. He simply made himself the friend, the loving one, the savior, the liberator (Edet, 1992).

Epilogue

Focusing her research and theological statements on the building of a community according to God's will and a renewal of the sight on women in the society, Rosemary Edet shifts new paradigms in the theological fields in Africa. She gives a critical positive insight in her evaluation of ritual in the traditional society, even if it could be ambivalent. She underlines for example the birth ritual as a positive moment for women. In fact, she sees in the rituals on the birth of a child the celebration of life, the closeness of God and of woman as co-creator of God.

The equal dignity of all the baptized expresses in a particular way how the liberation obtained at the cross is freedom and salvation for all. This freedom and equal dignity should be visible in the structure of the

Church that proclaims this Good News of liberation. That was the aim, in the short but powerful legacy of Sr Rosemary. As she writes: “As a concerned African woman, I wish to remind the Churches that women are part of the people of God and the body of Christ. We are called for freedom and salvation” (Edet, 1992:37). To this end therefore, it stands to reason that the suffering of a part of the Church is a suffering of the whole body called Church. Furthermore, if a part of the Church still does not feel the wind of freedom and salvation as proclaimed by it, then one might question the authenticity and seriousness attached to the message.

Edet has just blazed a path which, unfortunately, has not been pursued either by itself or by others. However, her desire for liberation is still shared today by the theologians who came after her.

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