



## 15 | AFRICAN FEMINISTS' TRAJECTORIES AS REFLECTED IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONTEMPLATIONS OF CELESTINA OMO SO ISIRAMEN

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### Abstract

Global accentuations have placed feminist agitations on the front burner in various climes. In this regard, African feminists have carved a niche for re-reading and re-interpreting the cultural and religious perception of African women, as a distinct enterprise. Within this space, Professor Isiramen evolves some philosophical-theological propositions in her logical discourses on the authentic humanization of African women. The paper interrogates Isiramen's unique penning as an African feminist philosopher. This study relies on answers to the following questions: (1) What are the cultural/religious practices that inspire her studies? (2) What are the ingredients that make up her philosophical-theological propositions for the liberation of African women? (3) How did she galvanize her philosophical-theological propositions into a unique model for African women liberation? The responses to these quizzes and more provide the necessary justification for flaunting Celestina Omoso Isiramen as an astute African Philosopher in the vanguard of African feminist theologians.

**Keywords:** African women, Celestina Isiramen, Christocentric humanization, Cultural-religious beliefs, Feminist theology and Philosophical-theological

### Introduction

Studies have shown that cultural and religious imperatives constitute hindrances to the flourishing of the girl-child in different climes. The quest for redress has generated numerous ideologies, identifiable as the traditional feminist stance, the liberal feminist stance and the radical feminist stance (Backstone, 1975:243). These have again polarized into African feminism and Western feminism. As an African feminist, Celestina Isiramen has carved a niche for herself as a philosopher of religion

and has, (in the course of time), propounded some philosophical-theological theories towards the emancipation of women. In x-raying Isiramen's contributions to African feminists' compendiums, this paper notes her several theoretical models but intends to elucidate her Christocentric humanization theoretical framework in order to project her as an astute African feminist matriarch.

## **Brief Biography of Prof. Celestina Omoso Isiramen**

Celestina Isiramen is a Professor of Philosophy of Religion of eighteen (18) years standing, having obtained her professorial chair in 2004. She is a lecturer at the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma Nigeria. She had her first degree in Religious Studies Education from the University of Benin, Nigeria in 1985, her Master's degree in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Ibadan in 1987 and acquired her PhD in Philosophy of religion in 1994 from Edo State University (Now Ambrose Alli University), Ekpoma, Nigeria. Celestina Isiramen is prolific, well published nationally and internationally. She has attended several national and international conferences and presented quality scholarly papers.

Apart from being a seasoned academic, Isiramen has held several administrative positions, and recorded several achievements, which unveil her as a trailblazer. For instance, she was the Senior Prefect (Head Girl), Edokpolo Grammar School, Benin City (1978-1979). She was the best graduating student from the Faculty of Education, University of Benin (Abraka Campus), 1985/1986 session. She is the first female Professor, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, first and only female Professor, Department of Religious Management and Cultural Studies, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma to date. She was Director, General Studies Division, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 2001-2004. She is the only female to have served in that capacity to date. She was the Director, University Consultancy Unit, 2006-2009, 2011-2014 and the only female to have served in that capacity to date. She is a two-time Senate elected member to the University Governing Council, 2001-2004, 2005-2009 and the only female to have served as elected member of Council

from Senate so far. She was the Dean, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 2014-2016 and the only female to have served in that capacity till now, to mention just a few.

She is the maiden Chairman, Board of Governors, Institute of Theological Studies, Uromi Diocese, Nigeria, 2010 – date; she is also the maiden Chairman, Board of Governors, Ufua Memorial Catholic Education Centre, Uromi, Nigeria, 2018-date. Isiramen belongs to several National and International academic bodies. She is a member of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians. She was the Nigerian South-South Zonal Coordinator of the Circle in 2010. She is a member of World Philosophical Congress, International Federation of Philosophical Societies and National Association for Women Academics. She is also a member of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religions, African Association for the Study of Religions and the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR), among others. She was a member of the National Committee on Inter-religious Dialogue, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2013-2016.

Isiramen passed with distinction from the specialized Capacity building Training in Higher Education (VICBHE), 2021. She also received training in Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI-Africa), African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and passed with Distinction as a Global Certified University Accreditor, 2021. She is a recipient of several awards and certificates (academic, spiritual and cultural). Isiramen is a Lady of the Order of the Knight of St. Mulumba (LSM), of the Catholic denomination. She has presented several public lectures and presented her Inaugural Lecture in 2014. Celestina Isiramen is married with children (Isiramen, 2022:1-20).

## **The Motivating Background to the Feminist Research of Celestina Isiramen**

Apart from being a natural advocate for fairness and justice, Isiramen's alignment with the feminist liberation campaigns stems from the circumstances that surrounded her birth and family background. The events expose the hazardous ecosystem to which an African daughter is born. Briefly, Isiramen hails from a polygamous family. Her late father

had five wives with 24 children, where she numbered as the 23rd child. The news of her birth as the 4th daughter of her mother, after 3 daughters, where other wives had male children was received by her late mother with tears. The pain of another female child was overwhelming.

Her mother separated from her father when the family took the decision that only boy-children would qualify for formal education. Since she had no son that would benefit from the largesse, she moved out of marriage and became a single mother. Her mother took up the challenge, worked hard and trained all her daughters up to the University level. Today, Isiramen is the only Professor out of the 24 children of her late father.

According to Isiramen, she grew up to appreciate her mother's resilience and enviable successes and understood that success is not gender biased but resides in hard work and self-determination. Having surmounted the patriarchal hurdles of the family, Isiramen became intolerant with all forms of discrimination against women. She concluded that discrimination against people is a crime against "humanity and God". Thus, in her contributions to feminist trajectories, Isiramen clearly made the point that "womanhood is not a handicap but an endowment" (Isiramen, 2014:13).

## **Isiramen's Discoveries on Male chauvinism and Women's Maltreatment in Africa**

- *The Inseparability between Religion and Culture in Africa*

Isiramen notes that in Africa, culture and religion are inseparable in the attempt to delineate the suppression of women. She says:

It behooves us to understand that...it is impossible to talk about the subjugation of women without referring to religion. The point becomes glaring in Africa to which Nigeria belongs. The culture of Africans is their religion and their religion is their culture (Isiramen, 2005:247).

Isiramen concludes that religion provides the spiritual anchor for every cultural precept on the girl-child in Africa (Isiramen, 2014:6).

• *The Cultural/Religious Perception of the Girl-Child*

Isiramen in 6 Ds\*, summarizes the cultural cum religious predicament of the girl-child in Africa. It begins with “disaffection at birth, then degradation as a child, then disintegration at girlhood, then dehumanization as a wife, then dispossession at widowhood and ends in miserable death” (Isiramen, 2002:20-31). Thus, the girl-child is born into an imperiled ecosystem armed with patriarchal thorns which choke every of her aspiration from birth to death.

**\*6 Ds**

1. Disaffection at birth: the perception of the girl – baby as “half current”, who cannot provide “Certificate of Occupancy” for her mother and preserve the family name of her father.
2. Degradation: refers to the deliberate reduction of the worth of the girl-child in relation to the boy-child.
3. Disintegration: refers to the cultural/religious curtailment of the strengths and capabilities of the girl child through stereotyping.
4. Dehumanization: refers to the treatment of wives as mere objects of sexual satisfaction, battery and the like.
5. Dispossession: the perception that widows and even women are not entitled to property inheritance.
6. Miserable death: refers to the overbearing circumstance that eventually result in women dying crestfallen, dejected, broken hearted, desolate, depressed, disconsolate and wretched.

Isiramen concludes that women were educationally disadvantaged, politically irrelevant, subjected to domestic violence, treated as mere objects, dispossessed, exposed to deadly diseases and suffered under inhuman widowhood rites at the death of their husbands. Women were falsely accused of demonic possessions and the cause of their husband’s misfortunes (Isiramen, 1997:6a; 2003:29; 2014:18-19). It was deadly for a woman to beget only female children and hellish without children and absolute misery trailed her earthly exit (Isiramen, 2014:5).

## The Narratives in Modern Times

Isiramen notes some elements of social change for the girl-child in modern times. For instance, the practice of giving out a girl-child in marriage without her consent has dwindled. Female children are now competing successfully with male children in outdoor activities. They can also choose careers according to their capabilities and sex stereotyping is gradually eroding (Isiramen, 1997:12a). Isiramen (2003:1a) is however, dismayed that in this century, African women are still battling with severe marginalization. They are included as token representations in governance who only occupy the second fiddle's position (Isiramen, 1997:15a). She laments that although many African countries have acceded to international and national treaties on the eradication of injustices against women, these unwholesome practices have continued to plague the genuine existence of women, escalating from the agonizing to the inexpressible. It is against this background, that the unrelenting campaigns by feminists can be properly, visualized.

## Feminist Agitations

Isiramen x-rays the development of feminist agitations and explains that scholars have advanced varied stances. These viewpoints are explainable in three conceptual frameworks (Blackstone, 1975:243; Isiramen 1997:26).

The first framework is the Traditional stance, which avers that the traditional requirements for women are in order and necessary for social cohesion. Within this perspective, women are required to accept their position as inferior to men. Summarily, the traditionalist posits thus: "Labour determined by sex differences, stereotyping of sex and the restrictions of female in opportunities and roles are not forms of oppression but the fulfillment of the nature of women; a necessity for family and societal cohesion" (Maynard, 1995:259-281). The second framework is the liberal standpoint, which insists, contrary to the above, that the stereotyping of sex roles is a social injustice. It explains that the rights of women in "social, legal and political spheres should be respected" (Maynard, 1995:259-281). The liberalist advocates that the marginalization of women is unjustifiable. Thus Blackstone (1974:243) says:

If the differences between men and women are such that prevent women from fulfilling certain roles or from performing certain roles, well then, discrimination between sexes may be justified, but the absence of such constraints mean that discrimination between sexes is unjust.

This stance emphasizes that the worth of women should be valued against the background of their abilities and outputs. The liberal does not condemn all traditional sex roles nor request the abolition of all traditional family values, but insists on the modifications of societal practices as a leeway for justice and fairness.

The third framework is the radical feminist stance, which advocates, “Complete revolution of the system and not mere reform”. To the radical feminist, child bearing creates weakness on women and makes them to be dependent while men remain dominant, resulting in oppression. The radical feminist calls for the total abolishment of biological differences through the aid of technology (Blackstone, 1974:243). Contraception and “artificial reproduction” should replace biological means of procreation. This would set women free from biological inequalities and sex classification. The radical feminist canvasses the stoppage of the entire sex role system (including child bearing), marriage and the family structure. It calls for freedom from “sexual classification... rather than mere equalization of sex roles” (Firestone, 1997:684).

Isiramen concludes from the foregoing that there is no consensus among feminist agitators on what freedom means for women and the means for attaining it. She warned against the employment of feminist strategies that could jeopardize the authentic aims of the struggles (Isiramen, 1997:243b). She contends that while the traditional stance is humanly and logically unrealistic for the flourishing of the girl-child, the radical stance is unfeasible, especially as many women are desirous of experiencing marriage and the biological processes of child bearing. Isiramen therefore, aligned with the liberal stance and propounded some liberation theories in the full gamut of philosophical-theological theoretical framework.

## Philosophical-Theological Models of Celestina Isiramen

Over the years, Isiramen has propounded some philosophical-theological theories as bases for making logical conclusions for authentic humanization of women. A careful examination of these theories, project Isiramen as a feminist whose thoughts on women liberation generate from logical calculations above superficial reasoning. This paper shall highlight some of these theories briefly and deeply x-ray her Christocentric humanization theory propounded in 2014 as its working model.

In 1997, Isiramen propounded the theory of Genuine Human Realization in canvassing the flourishing of the authentic dignity of the Nigerian woman by advocating an objective synthesis of aspects of culture/religion and modernity for the institution of egalitarianism in human societies. She emphasized that “the wrongness or rightness of all human acts should be valued from the perspective of human actualization” and not sex (Isiramen, 1997:10b). In 2003, she propounded the Survival Paradigm and emphasized the quest for the survival of women as a definition for their liberation. She recommended the logical re-reading of scriptures, and the humane selection of aspects of culture in the quest for the authentic survival of women (Isiramen, 2003:31-42b). In 2021, she propounded the Functionality-Empirical model through which she advanced that women’s capabilities portray their practical functionality and not sex (Isiramen, 2021:125-134).

The theory of **Christocentric** humanization crystallizes the crux of Isiramen’s thoughts on the emancipation of women. The theory focuses on the development of the human personhood as it relates to every human life, in recognition of human uniqueness. **Christocentrism** in this context implies “an ideology derived from the teachings of Christianity”. This theory anchors on faith and logic (Isiramen, 2014:16). Christocentric humanization therefore, emphasizes the humanization of women in line with the egalitarian reinterpretation of the teachings of Christianity and the adoption of valuable aspects of culture for the emancipation of women.

Isiramen explicates that the gift of humanity is divine. This means that it is not within the human power to choose to be human because

human beings are human by God's choice. It is however, within the human power, she says, to either frustrate or actualize this God-given humanity through choices that they make. Such choices can either frustrate their God-given humanity (thereby reducing humanity to the lowest ebb) or make human qualities to flourish as designed by the Creator. Human actualization is therefore, determined by wise humane choices and its degradation by foolish inhumane choices (Isiramen, 2014:274).

In this context, Isiramen interprets the full import of being human by relying on Christian ideologies, the teachings of biological sciences, psychology and philosophical thoughts on what humanity means. She explains further that the choice of human actions must go above general societal practices (cultural relativism) and one's own proclivity (subjectivism). Thus, Isiramen prescribes the intelligent choice of human actions for the actualization of the humanness of persons in seeking concrete behaviour that can lead to the achievement of genuine human goals (Isiramen, 1997:230). This is in line with the view of Ashley thus: "the determination of these goals do not find fulfillment in individual preferences (subjectivism) nor the custom of a particular culture (relativism) but on the true nature of the human person..." (Ashley, 1978:174). This theory of humanness provides a coherent framework for the authentic liberation of women in Africa (Isiramen, 2014:22).

### **Isiramen's Application of her Philosophical-Theological Model**

Isiramen galvanized the application of her theoretical framework by answering the following questions:

- i. Who is a woman?
- ii. What is the purpose of the woman on earth?
- iii. What is the faith of the woman in the hereafter? (Isiramen, 2014)

In answering the question who is a woman? Isiramen employed the explanations of the sciences, philosophical thoughts and theological reflections on the woman, in relation to the man. She dispensed with the definition of biological sciences that the woman "belongs to the sex which

conceives and gives birth to young ones or (in a wider sense) which produces ova..." (Biology Online 2014). She further explained that the constituents of the chromosomes define the woman to be essentially unique by her genetic make-up. The genetic theory explains that the difference between a man and a woman is in their chromosomes of X and Y. Lucas (1973:112) explains that: "Two X chromosomes exist in the cells of human females and these distinguish them from the human males with each cell having one X chromosome and one Y chromosome." Isiramen deduced from the above that both females and males are human beings who are only different by their genetic make-up. This difference does not input any constraints on the woman. Rather, it is a unique feminine endowment.

Psychologically, Isiramen points out that:

A woman's psyche, soul, spirit and conscience are only different from that of a man (not inferior) in the sense that while women enhance objective knowledge through intuition; seeing things in an inclusive context of the other pressures surrounding issues, rather than judging them on a rigid scale, men hastily assess issues by rigid dispassionate methods. (see Isiramen, 1997:239; Malley, 2001:54).

This psychological definition only distinguishes the woman from the man. This difference is again not a constraint. According to Isiramen, it only shows that despite the differences between males and females, "biology and psychology are in agreement that they are both human beings". (Isiramen, 2014:20).

She explains further that, philosophically, women and men are equal in capabilities. For instance, Nietzsche states that "...meditating on things...is one of the means" by which humans can ease the burden of life and that through a proper exercise of this act of meditation, one can secure the concrete reality at difficult times (Academy of Ideas, 2014:1). Thus, human awareness provides relevance for humanity. Every human being is capable of what he termed "psychological observations" and the insight to analytic perception of various ideas. This human capability is not a preserve of men. It is an endowment for all humans. For Karl Marx, "all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature." History is all about the creation of all humans (women inclusive)

as a product of work done (Karl Marx in Erich Fromm, 2014:1). In addition, Plato generalizes the origin of human morality when he stated that “for all good and evil... originates in the soul and overflows from thence, as from the head into the eyes” (Plato in AZQUOTES, 2014:1). Plato, thus, did not provide a differential morality for women and men.

Isiramen buttressed the above views by the teachings of the Bible, which explain the creation of the woman thus: “The creation of the woman as recorded in Genesis 2:21-23 explains that while the man was created from sand, the woman was privileged to have been created from the rib of the man. Thus, the man is mere sand while the woman is the refined man (Isiramen, 2014:30).” The teachings of Christ also show that womanhood is not a constraint. Jesus’ teaching was a deviation from the customarily entrenched prejudice against women of his time, when women were valued as “second class citizens”. Jesus taught: “...at the beginning, the Creator made them, male and female” (Matt. 19:14). In the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he gave women a pride of place. In Matt. 15:28, he praised the faith of the Canaanite woman, in John 11:26-27, he also praised the faith of Martha. He identified freely with women in public, contrary to the custom of the Jews (John 8:10-11). Jesus gave women and men equal intrinsic value and treated women as human beings for whom he came. Thus, he talked about salvation freely and publicly to the Samaritan woman at the Sychar well (John 4:7-26) and spoke publicly with the woman accused of adultery (John 8:10-11) among others. To Isiramen, the above explanations of who the woman is uphold that the woman is not in any way inferior to the man and that both are human beings as taught by the theory of “Universal Humanity” (Megan, 2019:1).

In explaining the purpose of the woman on earth, Isiramen avers that one of the most fundamental needs of humans is to have purpose for existence. Isiramen buttressed the above with the psychological thoughts of Schippers and Ziegler (2013:1). To them, human purpose on earth begins with the ability to understand one’s intrinsic values and goals and the best possible ways of attaining them. This is a human capability, which does not depend on sex (Isiramen, 2014:25). She expatiated further with the view of Plato the philosopher that asserts that human pursuit of the highest form of knowledge is the “form” of the Good, from which all

other goods “derive their utility and value” and that this summarizes the ultimate meaning of life (Plato in AZQUOTES, 2013). In addition, Epicurus taught: “the most pleasant life” is that in which human beings shun unimportant desires and attain inner serenity (Epicurus 2014). Isiramen concludes that, the attainment of such tranquility is human and not sex biased.

Buttressing the above, Christianity, according to Isiramen, teaches that the “search for salvation through the grace of God (John 11:26) is the human purpose on earth. *Westminster shorter Catechism* Quotes (2013), states that the purpose of human beings on earth is to “...glorify God and enjoy him forever” Christians are to obey the golden rule as spelt out in Matthew 7:12 thus: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...” Similarly, the *Baltimore Catechism* (2013:1) questioned; “why did God make you?” and answers thus: “God made me to know him, to love him and serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in heaven”. Isiramen deciphered from the above, that the ultimate purpose of a woman on earth is to prudentially, align with genuine acts. It hinges on responsible choices of “good, virtue, hard work, determination, obedience to divine commands and giving all up for God”.

Responding to the questions, what is the Faith of the Woman in the Hereafter? Isiramen explained that biology and psychology do not provide information about life after death. However, she says, philosophy provides some answers. Thus, Plato concludes, “the soul is immortal and therefore survives the death of the body” (Plato in Ivy panda, 2021). Furthermore, Aquinas’ teaching about after life is that the human soul is “immortal and exist in afterlife. The lot of the soul in afterlife depends on its deeds in its earthly existence (Aquinas in Cambridge Core, 2021:2).

Theologically, Isiramen (2014:30) explains that Christian eschatology is concerned with “death, judgment and the ultimate confirmation of God’s purposes.” The “concepts of eternal bliss in heaven and eternal damnation in hell” are tenets or Christian teachings about afterlife. The attainment of heaven or hell according to Christian teachings depends on obedience to the Ten Commandments and not on sex. Thus, Christianity does not teach a differential eschatology for women and men. The fate of the soul of a person depends on the person’s actions while alive, culminating in the condition of the soul at death.

As reflected above, Isiramen relied on biological, psychological, philosophical analyses and theological reflections to arrive at a logical conclusion that being a woman is not an albatross. She aligned with the liberal feminist in advancing, among others, the Christocentric humanization model through which she emphasized that for the proper development of humans and the society, wresting women from all forms of dehumanization is a panacea.

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

So far, this paper has espoused Isiramen's treatises on the need for the humanization of women by the application of wise humane choices. She notes that the issues regarding the maltreatment of women in Africa could not be underplayed. She also draws attention to the rise of feminist groups as a response to the awareness of the unacceptable injustices meted out on women and warns that the variant and diversified views on what constitute liberation for women and the means to attaining it portend grave hindrances to the struggles. She also noted some positive changes in the feminist narratives in modern times, but lamented that the maltreatment of women in many African communities has not abated, despite the enormous agitations by feminists and the fact that governments have globally acceded to several egalitarian treaties. Isiramen submits that from all analyses, being a female is neither a constraint nor an albatross. Therefore, discrimination against women is tantamount to human's inhumanity to human. Thus, she invariably, warns against truncating the potentials of women in any guise.

She garnered insight from diverse fields of knowledge and provides a logical basis for the egalitarian re-reading of the bible and judicious modification of our cultural life-styles through her Christocentric humanization framework. These, she says will provide for all persons (men and women) ways to rediscover the richness of the teachings of the Bible and authentic cultural values which would be the bedrock for eschewing male chauvinism from human societies. Isiramen's ideologies and insightful scholarly presentations, justify our conclusion that she is an astute African feminist matriarch. Her writings show feminists' trajectories as an enterprise that is not amenable to scholastic constraints. Her conclusions

hinge on several fields of study, which she contextualized into her philosophical-theological thoughts.

This paper concludes by stating the facts that the pioneers of African feminism have through frantic efforts won battles against the degradation of African women largely. This momentum must not quench. It is therefore, not discomfited to conclude by thrusting younger African feminist scholars to emulate feminists of the likes of Isiramen whose thoughts are capable of instigating critical feminist researches. The paper advises readers to read Isiramen's writings between the lines in order to discover its abundant invaluable treasures. These treasures heighten the indices that Professor Celestina Isiramen is an African philosophical-theological feminist matriarch of no mean repute.

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