
A Hermeneutical Call for Change: Asante & Lukan Women Crossing Boundaries

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By Abby Dinklage

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ASANTE & LUKAN WOMEN CROSSING BOUNDARIES

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Wandering under scorching sun for days, the people of the Asante tribe were dehydrated and near death. Without water and shelter, they were running out of time. The nomads came from Southern Africa. According to their legend, their leader and priestess, Eku, found their salvation—water. Putting herself at risk, she was the first to test the liquid for poisons; the water was clean. Her leadership and willing self-sacrifice made her a heroine in the tribe and the story of her ingenuity and courage passed down through the generations¹.

When an Asante woman child is born in southern Ghana, the mothers of the village wonder: “Who will she be?” Following in the tradition of Eku, an Asante girl is thought to be a life-giver, a supportive leader that is treasured within her community. The daughters of the Asante live for the survival of their people. In their world, the family lineage continues through the women, they are a matrilineal society. This type of society, although foreign to western sensibilities, offers an interesting, although diverse, perspective. In western Christian theology, where the authoritative voice is still predominately male, a matrilineal hermeneutic, such as the Asante might contribute, provides a unique and important view.

In this paper, I will use the traditional Asante matrilineal perspective to examine

two Lukan texts. The traditional Asante perspective, which weighed decisions more equally between women and men, of course changed somewhat with Christianity's patriarchal influence. Wanting to return to her cultural heritage, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, author of *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy*, attempts a matrilineal hermenutic more faithful to her tribal roots. Oduyoye is a Methodist theologian and the director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana. I will begin by describing Oduyoye's description of the Asante women's social location within Ghanaian history and tradition. I will then use that perspective in examining the description of the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:42-48, and later, with the pericope of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. I will use western feministic commentaries to compare and contrast Oduyoye's Asante matrilineal perspective.

An Asante Perspective

The Asante worldview emphasizes community, Ghanaian tradition, and its' history includes the typical ambivalence toward European colonization that brought the tribe Christianity. The wholeness of the Asante community depends upon gender roles, and, not unlike other societies, tradition and religion are integral to its collective identity. In balancing the tension to uphold the demands of both Ghanaian tradition and western Christianity, there is inevitable conflict.

Before one can appreciate the cultural perspective of another, one must first be aware of one's own cultural worldview. Class, cultural values, locale, and education have profound effects on personal perspective. In a North American context, individualism and

materialism are highly regarded. Attaining wealth and the freedom it may bring potentially places one on a societal pedestal. Competition, even for the very young, is considered to be healthy, which, at least in some sense, covertly claims selfishness as the path to high achievement. In contrast, Asante women value and promote selflessness as their highest achievement. Every aspect of Asante women's lives are in service to their community. In addition to the traditional expectations of motherhood, Oduyoye explains women's societal involvement:

All the women I knew worked: farming, trading, or processing and selling food and other daily necessities. Marriage did not change women's economic involvement...Marriage, therefore, only added responsibilities to these women's lives. It seemed to me, however, that the more these women made others comfortable and dependent upon them, the more they felt alive².

A final point to make about the Asante's perspective once again touches upon their matrilineal heritage. The children belong to the mother's family; therefore, women are decision makers regarding the upbringing of their children. In the community, there are two decision makers, the Ohemma (Queen Mother) and the Ohene (King). The Ohemma—Queen Mother has been superior in hierarchy to the Ohene and was traditionally involved in all communal female concerns³.

African Religion

Before southern Ghana was colonized and introduced to Christianity, traditional African religions dominated. These traditions are still ingrained in the culture of the people. The Asante take religion seriously; it is intertwined socially throughout life,

particularly in rites of passage⁴. A woman is completely “whole” in procreation, She is “to become a channel for ancestors to return through her offspring⁵.” This is viewed, by the Asante, as an extremely beautiful part of being a woman; women are treasured because of their procreative gift. Marriage, therefore, is generally seen to benefit two groups of people: the mother’s family continues its lineage through the woman’s children and the father’s family receives the essential womanly services of procreation and child-rearing from the mother⁶.

With the introduction of Christianity, typical biblical texts¹, were used by clerics in the African church to support the subordination of women⁷, In Asante society, this patriarchal departure from their traditional worldview affected the cultural matrilineal norms that had always defined Asante women⁸. Because of its patriarchal bias, Christianity in Africa has not helped to elevate the status of women. Interestingly, like other places in the world, the church would not have flourished without female support and leadership. Unfortunately, church teaching in some Christian traditions denies ecclesial leadership to Asante women and places them beneath male authority⁹. This is despite the fact that women make up the majority of church attendance, form religious organizations, and pass their religious faith on to their children.

Oduyoye proposes a womanist hermenutic that has the perspective to challenge this patriarchal bias. Her matrilineal perspective is particularly helpful when interpreting biblical texts that pertain to women and women’s issues. To test Oduyoye’s methodology, I will be examining two texts, Luke’s pericopes of Martha and Mary and the hemorrhaging woman.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 “A man, on the other hand, should not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.” Some Hebrew Scriptures may be used to support male domination

Martha and Mary

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

When examining Luke 10:38-42 it is important to note that there is no mention of any men in this story, other than, of course, Jesus. The roles of Martha and Mary could be interpreted in different ways, but from an Asante perspective a literal reading of the pericope has the most influence. The role of Martha would easily be related to many Asante women, who prepare and serve their families and guests. The Asante would expect Mary to help her sister in the preparation of the meal. The answer that Martha received from Jesus, when asking for help from her sister, would stun an Asante woman.

Although Jesus' judgment is shocking, it also offers hope. Jesus is asking Martha to stop worrying about fulfilling social expectations. He is showing her another path that gives life, listening to him. Since the Asante believe that all of human persons are children of God. Jesus' admonition to Martha's interpretation does not stand in

opposition to their beliefs concerning human dignity, but merely challenges their societal expectations. While this pericope does not put a negative connotation upon homemaking or service to others, it does challenge any connotation that womanly subordination is necessary to a Christian perspective.

Canon Loveday Alexander, a minister and biblical studies professor in the United Kingdom is a New Testament feminist scholar with an emphasis on Luke. Her book, *Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha's Story*, expresses similar concerns as the Asante, but also proposes a number of other hermeneutical insights. The structure of the Lukan story portrays the good vs. bad behavior of Martha and Mary; however, in viewing the behavior of the sisters as good vs. better changes the meaning behind Jesus' lesson to Martha.

Alexander points out that this pericope is Martha's story. Martha and Jesus have the conversation and the lesson of the story is given to her. Mary does not speak, or act, but is upheld for her discipleship. Martha is rebuked for fussing while Mary is praised for listening. Alexander's examination of the pericope suggested that the behaviors examined as good vs. better behavior gives a different meaning to the text--this pericope is not a debate about domestic roles, but of discipleship. Alexander interprets the story as evidence of the inclusion of women into Jesus' discipleship¹⁰.

Hemorrhaging Woman

The Asante also bring an interesting perspective to the second pericope, Luke's account of the hemorrhaging woman. The Asante view blood as sacred and taboo. Blood is the theological substance of life. It makes a person whole and pure. Those with spilled blood in the Asante tribe are outcast. Asante men with scars are forbidden to have a high

position of leadership. Asante women are set apart during their menstruation because this blood-letting is associated with negative spirits. Women are not allowed to be around men or speak to certain clan men during their menstruation and Asante villages have special homes for menstruating women to stay during this time. Asante women are not allowed to go to war after puberty or before menopause, because of the value given to their life-giving capabilities. A woman in the child-birthing age is portrayed as a constant life source. She is not seen as a whole individual, but a possible channel for more life¹¹.

The contradiction between the life-giving potential of women and the traditional taboo of blood reflects, perhaps, the ambivalence that most human societies have toward the simultaneously very mystifying and realistically very messy mystery of life. Several boundaries are crossed in Luke's story.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:42-48).

A woman suffering for twelve years of hemorrhaging would be well known and avoided by Asante society. She may even have been condemned as a witch. It is this type of outcast woman who reached out and touched Jesus, something that is forbidden not only of menstruating women, but of “impure,” the wounded and sick, as well. To the Asante, therefore, the behavior of the women would be shocking. Her faith in Jesus saved and made her “whole” again. Jesus’ open and forgiving reaction to the woman’s touch would again shock a society that fears blood.

In her book, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Turid Karlsen Seim, Head of the Norwegian Institute in Rome and a former New Testament theologian at the University of Oslo points out that a main emphasis in Luke is the inclusion of “the other.” Included in this notion of the other are gentiles, women, and the ostracized. In Luke’s gospel Jesus is not attempting to overturn or reverse roles, but balance and create relationships based on common humanity¹².

In reading these gospel stories, the Asante are trying to balance their matrilineal African heritage with patriarchal Christian churches. As Oduyoye mentioned, Christianity has often oppressed women, even though the Christian scriptures can be read in a matriarch key. A purely patriarchic approach to Christian scripture endangers women and replaces traditional respect for women’s leadership with subjugation. In order to foster equality between women and men, as it was in traditional Asante society, the voices of the women must be heard and respected. To do this, women must be restored to positions of authority and leadership.

Because of cultural differences, western feminism cannot speak for women in Africa¹³. Oduyoye calls for action from all of her African sisters. She turns to the

Christian church, which preaches equality for all, but falls short in appreciating not only the humanity but also the gifts of its female members¹⁴. She calls African women to emulate their traditional loving leader, Eku, in self-sacrificing service and leadership. The way to a loving and functional community must include both women and men, in leading roles as the wisdom of Asante tradition describes.

1 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 8.

2 Oduyoye, 7.

3 Oduyoye, 7.

4 Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 11.

5 Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 13.

6 Oduyoye, 135.

7 Oduyoye, 174.

8 Oduyoye, 176.

9 Oduyoye, 120.

10 Loveday C. Alexander, *Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha's Story*, ed. Amy-Jill and Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 213

11 Oduyoye, 119.

12 Turid Karlsen Seim, *Searching the Scripture: Vol. 2 A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza with Ann Brock and Shelly Matthews (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 729.

13 Oduyoye, 88.

14 Oduyoye, 185.