African feminist theology is a recent phenomenon.1 Where male theologians such as John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh, Kā Mana, Laurenti Magesi and others have become widely known, very few of their female counterparts have received attention and recognition in the Western academic world. For years the Ghanaian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, well known through her work at the World Council of Churches, was the only black African woman theologian whose publications were widely read. Only a few scholars were also familiar with the publications of women like Teresa Okure, Mary Getui and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasaki. More recently the work of the Biblical scholar Musa Dube has received world-wide recognition. To insiders also the names of Louise Tappa, Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge, known through their work in global organisations such as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, the Lutheran World Federation and World Alliance of Reformed Churches, ring a bell, but few people have read their publications. But apart from these women, there are many more African women theologians who have a valuable contribution to make to African theology. Several hundreds women associate themselves with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians2 and its aims of research and publication. But only few have been able to find ways and means to publish their research and therewith making their voices heard.

This article wants to entice the reader to widen his or her perspective of African theology by introducing some themes and persons in African feminist theology. The article will start with a historical background of African feminist theology, its aims and methods. Then it will discuss two of the key themes of African feminist theology and point to the gradual diversification of insights that is taking place. The article will end with some concluding remarks.

1 The inspiration for this article came from the invitation I received to attend the third Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in August 2002 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The article wants to honour the persistence and zeal I saw in many of the women I met to research and write and is at the same time a vote of thanks for the many books I received for the IIMO library.

2 In August 2002 the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians held their third Pan-African Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. More than 150 delegates from anglophone, lusophone and francophone countries participated and presented their research papers.

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Historical background of African Feminist theology

Oduyoye is sometimes called the matriach of African feminist theology. There is no doubt that she has acted as a catalyst in establishing a network of African female theologians, known as the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and has stimulated many women to research and write. Her zeal for a women’s contribution to African theology is most pungently expressed in her famous statement that a bird with one wing cannot fly. African female theologians maintain that African theology is not complete, even handicapped, without the women’s voice. The work of African women theologians is therefore to equip theology in Africa ‘with the missing wing’. But Oduyoye’s advocacy for a feminist contribution to African theology was not a creation ex nihilo. Njoroge identifies four movements, which have helped African women to express their theological views and take up their rightful places in the church.

The first movement she mentions is the missionary movement. The example and dedication of women missionaries, both white and black, and their efforts to ameliorate the position of women through women’s education, have played a crucial role in raising the self esteem of women and have helped women to articulate themselves. Through the missionary movement women also received possibilities to network. Both within their own country through women’s church fellowships and through world-wide organisations such as Young Women’s Christian Association, the Fellowship of the Least Coin and the World Day of Prayer, women were able to meet and encourage each other.

In her Ph.D. thesis Kiama Kia Ngo, an African Christian feminist ethic of resistance and transformation Njoroge shows how through the influence of the missionary movement, Christian women among the Gikuyu in Kenya formed a united front against female circumcision and through guilds and campaigns were able to transform the ideas of female initiation in Gikuyu society. Isabel Phiri on the contrary makes critical comments on the impact of the missionary movement on the position of women in her doctoral dissertation Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious experience

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7 N.J. Njoroge, Kiama Kia Ngo, 10-36.