

The Theology of late Rev. Sister Rosemary Nkoyo Edet in a Sociological Context

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Abstract

Although the Rev. Dr. Rosemary Nkoyo Edet has contributed substantially to Gender Studies and African theology, her work remains underexplored. It lacks sufficient documentation, especially within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. The limited analysis and recognition of Edet's liberation theology—celebrated for fostering coexistence, intercultural dialogue, and the dignity of women—diminishes its potential to inspire the Circle and contribute to breaking down patriarchal systems that perpetuate inequality, aggression, and insecurity in Nigeria. Drawing on historical and historiographical approaches, this paper examines Edet's theories and philosophy. It highlights that her theology, which addresses the Church's role in societal needs, women's and human liberation, interreligious relations, and inclusive cultural and social issues, provides a vital framework for confronting contemporary challenges in both religious and social spheres. The study finds that Edet's work illuminates critical topics such as the marginalization of women, ongoing harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation, and the failure to fully implement international agreements like the 1995 Beijing Declaration's 35% affirmative action for women's participation in nation-building. Therefore, it is recommended that Edet's theological contributions to gender studies be thoroughly documented to maximize their relevance to today's gender and societal challenges.

Keywords: *theology, Nkoyo Edet, women theologian, liberation, theology, cultural practices, church responsibility*

Introduction n the realm of gender studies in Nigeria, Rev. Dr.

I Rosemary Nkoyo Edet is a prominent figure due to her significant contributions to the discourse on the intersection of church and gender, particularly within the Catholic Church and various women's organizations she actively served. A monograph on her life reflects on her death, addressing philosophical themes such as the mystery of death, the fleeting nature of life, the problem of evil and illness, and Jesus' responses to these challenges, alongside Christian perspectives on suffering.

Additionally, the book *African Literature, Mother Earth, and Religion* was dedicated to her memory in recognition of her advocacy for women's liberation from male dominance and societal discrimination. Despite these scholarly efforts, few, if any, dedicated works specifically focus on her theology. This paper aims to examine the theology of Rev. Dr. Rosemary Nkoyo Edet, a well-deserved exploration based on her numerous academic contributions to theology and New Testament Studies. The paper provides biographical insights into her life and theological work, concluding with reflections on her legacy.

Biography of Rosemary Nkoyo Edet

Sister Rosemary Edet, born in 1935, was the daughter of the late Chief Edet Akpan Udo from Okot Okpon in Uyo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, and Madam Theresa Ansa Odo from Ikot Ansa, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. She earned a PhD and was appointed a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Calabar due to her strong academic background. Her specialization was in New Testament Studies, focusing on feminism, the relationship between church and culture, women and culture, inculturation, and Catholicism.¹ According to one of her students, now a professor, Sister Edet was a good lecturer in teaching, supervising and rendering community service². One of her colleagues, while she was a lecturer at the university, affirmed that Sister Edet was a great scholar whose impact on the growth of the department and the creation of good rapport between staff and students and among her colleagues were unquantifiable³.

Aside from her academic endeavour, Rosemary Edet was a reverend sister who devoted her service to the Catholic Church. On 25th January 1957, during the feast of the conversion of the Great Apostle Saint Paul, she received the Postulate Hood in the congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. In 1961, she made her first profession, her final profusion in 1970, her silver jubilee on 15 January 1986, and was elected the vicar general of our congregation (Holy Child Jesus) on December 18th 1989. In total, she put in 32 years of service to the Congregation, mainly in the education Apostolate of the Catholic Church, where she functioned as an ordained Reverend Sister. Within the 32 years of her service, Sis Rosemary Edet was a Principal of Holy Child T.T.C, Oron, Holy Child T.T.C, Ifuho, St. Theresa's Secondary School, Edem Ekpai, Pioneer Principal of Assumption Girls Juniorate, Ndon Ebom, Tutor at Holy Child Secondary School Marian Hill, Calabar, to mention just a few. Her concern for the growth of the Catholic Church and making her liturgy relevant to society was remarkable.

Apart from being a member of the Catholic Church and a notable Catholic Order, Rosemary Edet was also a member of the Learned Women Association and organizations, some of which are the Circle of Concerned African Women

Theologians (COCAWT), The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was founded in

Ghana, West Africa in 1989 to amplify Pan-African and inter-religious theological perspectives of African women in which Rosemary Edet played a notable role as reflected in, *Circle Thinking: African Woman Theologians in Dialogue with the West*. She was also a prominent member of The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), a network of theologians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America interested in creating a theology relevant to their contexts. Her contributions to these associations were remarkable. Rosemary Edet died in 1993, but her memory still lingers in all the associations she belonged to, as references were made to her in publications after her death.

Theology of Rosemary Nkoyo Edet

Late Sister Rosemary Nkoyo Edet can be described as a theologian looking at the contents, context, intents, and depth of her publications in books, journals, conference presentations, and academic and spiritual activities. Her primary tool is engaging theological issues in the Bible and their relations to society, particularly women and the church. A cursory look at her publications brings to the limelight her effort at appropriating some theological issues about women, church, culture, rituals, inculturation and religious relations concerning their biblical bases and their implication for society is an excellent example of contextualization. Contextualization is also evident in her interrogation of the aforementioned theological issues and, by so doing, placed the church at the centre of society not only as a spiritual institution but also as a social institution with a duty to address societal problems such as discrimination, injustice, and ethical aberration meted on women in particular, among others. It is this understanding of theology that Eden's publications were categorized and content analyzed as discussed below:

Theology of Church Responsibility Toward Societal Needs

In her paper, "The Nigerian Theologians at the Service of the Church," Edet dealt with the church's and theologians' obligations to society. A critical look at her treatise on the subject matter informed what we categorised as the theology of Church responsibility to societal needs. The thrust of her argument is that the church must be responsive by theologising on the question of man, the purpose of life and the meaning of history, the importance of cultures, the evolution of socio-political situations, the impact of the invisible and the necessity of God; about health and happiness, poverty and power, death and the afterlife. In all these, her position is that the Church should make the Gospel credible to all eyes and hearts of Nigerians.

In light of her definition of the Church's responsibility to society, Edet argues that the Church will find it challenging to respond to the yearning of her immediate society until she contextualizes Christian theology. To Edet, theologians must depart from Western-oriented theologization, which has brought about what she calls the "growing cultural alienation" present within Christian churches. Her argument is based on the observation that evangelization has not been cultural exchange but cultural domination or assimilation.

Theology of Theologian as a Servant of the Church

Edet sees a theologian as a servant of the church. In other words, the theologian is expected to serve the church faithfully, succumb to its hierarchical structure and work hand in hand with other theologians to bring about a good society that matches the word of God with social action. She writes rhetorically that A Nigerian theologian can best serve the church by theologizing as a Nigerian, that is, by interpreting the Gospel and the aspiration of the poor into a new language. This language will make the voice of those who have no voice heard in a country that is ill-disposed to listen to them. She noted that Nigerian theology is characterized by the interpretation of an individual account, which taps the valuable resources of the traditional religions of Nigerians. To her, such resources should be in tandem with scriptural passages and must not be wishful thinking or mere imagination of a theologian.

Theology of women/human liberation

As one of the prominent members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which is a forum for hearing women's voices in African theology, Edet devoted a substantial aspect of her publications to discussing the plight of women amid men folk in African society that is predominantly patriarchal in theory and practice. A few of the plight of widows she discussed were the rituals they have to undergo, such as shaving their heads and forcing them to drink the water used to bathe the corpse of their husband as proof that they don't have hands in the death of their husband.⁴ To Edet, these processes widows have to undergo belittle their dignity widows specifically and womanhood in general. Worst still, she notes that most of the unfair rituals widows have to go through, and other forms of hostility against women come from women who may become widows themselves. Moreover, the rituals create a division among women to their detriment, a disintegrating factor in the community. Condemning this widowhood practice and its general effects on women on the one hand and human beings generally on the other hand, Edet, in one of her publications: "Christianity and African Women Rituals," argues that all forms of unfair and inhuman treatment of women for any reason are opposed to Christian's principle of love and life. On this account, she advocates for the

Christian proclamation of human liberation and the equality of men and women. To get this actualised, Edet, one after the other, apportions some responsibilities to women and the Church. For women, she expects them to be bold enough to claim that they are a factor in the *Imago Dei* agenda, which qualifies them to be called to an equal status with men and united in the community of all who believe in Christ and sensitive and thinking women who have received the message of salvation and can effectively proclaim it to humanity. For the Church, she writes:

As a concerned African woman, I wish to remind the church that women are part of the People of God and the Body of Christ. We are called to freedom and salvation. The People of God are simultaneously the mystery of the presence of the risen Christ and the sociological expression of human activity at a particular time in history. We are part of that people, and, as such, we are on the move, both in a *kairos* that has been proclaimed.

Regarding the church's leadership structure, Edet showed how women were marginalized by making them look subservient to their male counterparts. Illustrating the examples of poor treatment of women in leadership, Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, while commenting, speak of women's participation in the church, remarking that women are relegated to "fund-raisers and rally organizers."⁵ This view is corroborated by Ayantayo, who observed that even though the number of women attending church services and contributing immensely to the development of the church outnumbered that of their male counterparts, they were still denied leadership positions in the church, just like it was in African traditional religious settings.⁶

Given this background, Edet, as a Catholic sister, joined hands with other sisters in developing a theological language to give women new authority and autonomy as mothers and make them climb the ladder of ecclesia leadership positions. Still, on language, the sisters proposed using scriptural texts, exploring the liberating praxis of Christ and the apostolic authority of Mary, and Papal announcements to advance the argument for women's proper dignity and authority within their religious settings. Killing two birds with one stone, as alluded to by Theresa Okure, Edet and other sisters, demand for women's liberation, justice, political freedom and women's empowerment in Catholicism and the development of the fresh conception of 'Church, as communion, family and people of God and a fresh appropriation of the 'mind of Christ

Theology of interreligious relations

Perhaps as a scholar of Religious Studies, Edet is aware of religious pluralism, which is a way of admitting that apart from Christianity, there are other religions in Nigeria, such as Traditional Religion and Islam. She was also conscious of religious pluralism's challenge to interreligious relations, mainly as it affects Catholicism. On this account, Edet theologizes what the disposition of

Christianity should be about Islam and traditional religion. Similarly, she challenged the tradition of discrimination against women in the two religions. This viewpoint was reflected in her joint paper with Ekeya. They urged women, teachers, and catechists to be engaged in dialogue, finding common ground for ‘dismantling sexism’ and renewing the Church’s ‘mission, ministry, and theology as a sphere of women’s service. Her advocacy for inter-religious dialogue was made concerning *lineamenta* (working documents of the African Synod); this document spells out how African Christians live and relate with Islam - as an ‘important and often difficult partner.’⁷ To our mind, the recommendation for dialogue is a good one because of constant religious conflict and unhealthy relations between Christians and Muslims coupled with the rise of Religious terrorists and fundamentalist groups springing up rapidly in West Africa and her neighbours.

Theology of inclusiveness

Looking at Edet’s publications, we noticed that little spaces were allotted to women based on the patriarchal tradition. This phenomenon is what I decided to label the theology of inclusiveness because it canvasses for a system where colour, race and gender differences are considered immaterial, especially in religious settings where gender discrimination and marginalization of women have held sway for ages. The main thrust of many of Edet’s publications is that women, like their male counterparts, should not be discriminated against in apportioning responsibilities associated with religious liturgical activities and in taking a catalogue of scholars engaging in theological studies in Theological Institutions and Universities. This feeling is expressed by Edet and Ekeya while evaluating the state of women in the church, who argued that women’s participation in the church is relegated to “fund-raisers and rally organizers,”⁸ Undermining the traditional involvement of women in religious life. As they talk of women moving between African traditional religions and Christianity, they speak of the African woman as “yet to be consulted by theologians.” When one considers the contributions of women theologians to theological studies in the light of contemporary issues, one can easily conclude that any compendium of theologians that excludes theologians like Oduyoye Kanyoro, Dube, Okure, Ekeya and Edet, in particular, is not complete. The contributions of these women theologians on the relevance of theology, its methods and its relationship with society on issues such as women’s development, women and culture, theological language, women and evangelization, women and religious rituals, and church traditions, dialogue, justice, peace and social communications cannot be underrated.

Cultural and social theology

Edet places some responsibility on the shoulders of theologians. Apart from what they are expected to do and theologize about the sociopolitical situations of Nigeria, they are also likely to establish closer contact with the significant sources of revelation- the Bible and Tradition and explore them holistically to solve many social-political problems in Nigeria's time such as injustice, religious bigotry, discrimination based on a difference in religion, sex, tribe and age. This calls for the acceptance of the fact that theology is socially and culturally conditioned.

Conclusion

Using content analysis to explore the life and work of the late Sister Dr Rosemary Edet, her theology can be categorized into several key areas, including but not limited to the theology of the Church's responsibility to address societal needs, the theology of the theologian as a servant of the Church, women and human liberation theology, theology of interreligious relations, theology of inclusiveness, and cultural and social theology. These themes highlight her belief that theologians and the Church should serve society by addressing its challenges and providing solutions rooted in Scripture and Church Tradition.

This service also involves taking decisive action to eliminate discrimination against women within the Church and society. This can be accomplished by contextualizing relevant biblical passages and condemning injustice, double standards, and discriminatory practices, particularly those that perpetuate patriarchal attitudes that view women as subordinate to men. Additionally, Church authorities and proponents of such patriarchal views should be reminded of the *imago Dei*—the image of God inherent in women. In our interpretation of Rosemary Edet's works, the concept of the *imago Dei* in women can be seen as the central focus of her theology. We believe that Edet's theological approach, when applied to society, can foster coexistence, partnership, intercultural exchange, the sanctity of life, the dignity of womanhood, and unity within the Church, extending outward to society at large. Her liberation theology mainly serves as a valuable reference for these aims.

Moreover, Edet's theology offers a foundation for both new and veteran members of the Circle of African Women Theologians to engage with contemporary issues such as the marginalization of women in religious and societal contexts, the persistence of female genital mutilation, and the failure to fully implement the 1995 Beijing Declaration's 35% affirmative action, which advocates for women to take active roles in nation-building. This persistent patriarchal dominance, which fuels aggression and corruption, has contributed to various forms of insecurity in Nigeria.

By following these recommended steps, the Circle of African Women Theologians can make significant strides toward achieving its longstanding goal of liberating women from patriarchal oppression.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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