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***Hope Is as Strong as a Woman's Arm:
Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls
in Africa and Its Diaspora – A Reflection***

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This essay reflects on the 2012 Consultation of African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology. Strategically organised and meeting for the first time on the African continent (Ghana, Our Motherland), the conference participants gathered to bond, reflect and nourish our wearied bodies and souls. Battered and worn out by the various forms of violence unleashed on us, we bared our hearts, sharing our pain, sorrow, struggles and anxieties within the context of a multi-faith community. This unique occasion provided the much needed safe space and time for us to learn new ways of seeing, knowing, understanding, and relating, as well as to consider ways of preventing and surviving violent situations. After meeting and enriching ourselves and drawing strength from our religious, cultural and historical heritage, we once again bid farewell to each other as we journeyed back to our various destinations. This time, however, we parted with a resolve to always remember who we are, the daughters of the mythical Ghanaian ancestress, Anowa.

As I began my reflections on the above theme and the program that ensued under it, I could not help but think: What was it like when similar groups of women of African descent (both from the continent and the Diaspora, some of whom were in our midst) met in 1989? Although brought together by different circumstances and opportunities, it must have been an awesome meeting for the first time at the Interdenominational Theological Center, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA (in the diaspora) and later in Legon, Accra-Ghana (on the continent). By these references, I am not in any way ignoring other, previous meetings in which these two groups of women participated or met with other Third World women theologians.¹ I acknowledge it has been a long and strenuous journey, and we are most grateful for this spirit of unity, endurance and resilience.² These historical connections and continuous bonds of solidarity were made vividly clear during the gathering, most especially, during the opening ritual of invocation and the planting of the cinnamon tree to commemorate the life of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz.

The specific identification of the 1989 meetings is because I believe they serve as important landmarks in development of African women's theological reflections, that provided the needed foundation for this unique and purposeful 2012 conference of African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology. For instance, the seminal texts that issued from the Legon meeting, *Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* and *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, are very significant early

¹ See Virginia Fabella, MM and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, editors, *With Passion and Compassion: Third Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

² Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 103-104.

publications that present African women's theological reflections but include a statement by a woman from the diaspora.³ In the text *Talitha Qumi*, these women commented on the opportunity given to them to arise. They also resolved to arise, and by so doing cultivated relationships and analyses that yielded a second text, *The Will to Arise*. Two decades later, these self-willed women, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle), have grown like a mustard seed into a big tree for the younger daughters of Africa to nest. Besides that, they are entering into a new phase of development, as evidenced by this conference. Therefore, it is now quite clear that such monumental events of the past are not simply meant to be treasured as memory, but to be passed on. In this context, they are passed on with hope, not hopelessness.

Interestingly, as I contemplated these historical events, I also recalled an advertisement that used to run on some of our Ghanaian television channels with the theme: "Key soap, the tradition goes on." The connection between the two recollections is not far-fetched. Key soap, a common branded soap in Ghana, is shown in the advertisement as being introduced by a mother to her daughter as she goes about her household chores. This daughter grows and does the same with her daughter, now there is a third generation of key soap users in the family. The advertisement concludes with the statement, "The tradition goes on." Similar to the creativity of modern advertisements, these meetings of the "Daughters of Anowa" have come to stay, forming a tradition for us. The past meetings were occasioned by different circumstances, but in this third meeting, uniquely planned with a theme of HOPE, the dialogue among the "Daughters of

³ See, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, editors., *Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians* (Ibadan-Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1990) and Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, editors, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992).

Anowa” is here to stay. The previous meetings of African and African diasporan women may have taken different phases and forms, growing slowly, but now the die is cast, as Oduyoye exclaimed: “At last, it is going to happen.”⁴

This historic meeting was the development of a dream, a dream nurtured with love and great expectation like that of a pregnant woman; it was birthed with a beautiful theme of hope. It is one in which this hope is expressed metaphorically as being “strong as a woman’s arm”; perhaps, as she gathers and leads her daughters to safety from violence while struggling to raise them. It is in this respect that I see the current conference as a continuation of a tradition, a legacy, if one prefers that. With some members from the 1989 meetings present, there was a genuine glimmer of hope for the future. Even though some of the women of the 1989 meetings could not be present – Brigilia Bam, Musimbi Kanyoro, Katie G. Cannon, and Jacquelyn Grant – their “letters of greetings to conferees” were a joy to read, and we treasured the support of these illustrious women of our history. Apart from that, opening the conference programme with the welcome note from Mercy Amba Oduyoye addressing all as “Daughters of Anowa” reminds us that we are all (women and girls of Africa and its Diaspora) of one ancestry, even if it is mythical.⁵

Therefore, no matter the context or the extent of our separation and our current standing in the world today, we are one. It was, thus, not surprising that our first major activity for the

⁴ See both the historical link and this statement in “Letter from Conference Coordinators,” Conference Agenda, African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology Conference, Talitha Qumi Centre, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana, 2012.

⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

conference was a solemn ritual of invocation. As it called on the spirit of unity among us, it asked for the kind of transformation that will not only reconcile us but “Heal the wounds of our history.” As we gathered with diverse religious and cultural traditions as well as social backgrounds, we also celebrated our unity in diversity through the ritual moment as prayers from Christianity, Islam and the indigenous African Religion were said.

Who Are We? From Where Do We Come?

We are the women and girls of Africa and its Diaspora. From Africa, we came from Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia. The Ghanaian women came from the length and breadth of the country, representing the three major religions (Indigenous Religion, Islam and Christianity). Although few women represented Nigeria and Liberia, the smallness of the representation, due to financial constraints, does not negate significance of the participation. The Diaspora women travelled from the USA, including women from several states and the Caribbean. Together in Ghana (Our Mother Land), we knew who we were. We are the “Daughters of Anowa,” gathering at her feet to share our experiences of pain, sorrow, anxiety, love, joy and hope. Yes, we gathered at her feet once more to drink from her fount of wisdom, the recipe for our strength and resilience, for the long and tedious journey ahead.

The women who gathered realized that regardless of where we come from, as women – who were once girls – we are bound to face some challenges, for being who we are. This made the questions included in the subtitle above, at some points of the conversations, irrelevant. Even so, we did not overlook or cover-up our diversity. Neither did we deny or over exaggerate our

similarities. Rather, we accepted our cultural, geographical, class, etc., differences and shared our diverse but unique experiences. Through rituals, tears, frustrations, songs, drama, cultural dance performances, laughter and joy, we learnt from each other. As we had already invoked the spirit of our unity as “Daughters of Anowa,” there was a demonstration of our unity in diversity which is typical of the African family or community life.

The presence of the Queen Mother, Nana Amba Eyiaba, Krontihemaa of the Oguaa Traditional Area, made our time spent together even more enriching and memorable. Her graceful personality, humility, knowledge and practical experience made Nana Eyiaba’s contributions insightful and significant. This had a strong impact on all of us, even though on different levels. First, her role in our midst clearly epitomised the Queen Mother as the symbol of motherhood in the traditional Ghanaian community. Consequently, her presence brought into our discussion, the place and role of female leadership (political, religious or otherwise) in our societies. Secondly, Nana Eyiaba’s presence helped us to realise that it does not matter who we are, where we come from or our religious affiliation, as women of Africa and African descent, we are in a constant state of negotiations. Even as we listened to the keynote address by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and engaged each other in conversation, we noted that in our individual lives as women we always face negotiations; irrespective of whether we were raised as single children or with siblings, as sisters, friends, single independent career women, women with various sexual orientations, single mothers, wives in monogamous or polygamous homes, mothers, grandmothers, etc., we are in a constant flux of negotiations.

This became evident as we introduced ourselves in very elaborate and profound ways. At this point, the question of “Who Are We?” rose beyond the individual women who were physically present. Participants bringing along (in our minds and bodies) spirits of those whose bodies we could not touch was intense and emotional. As illustrated in the following introductory statements: “I am ... and I come with/I bring along the spirit of my grandmother, mother, sister, etc.” It is for some of these reasons that the question “Who is an African or African American woman?” may be seen a complicated question, hence, desiring more than a simple straight forward answer. This complexity is because who we are is not a simple issue of skin colour or some other genetic trait, even though this is crucial.⁶ Who we are is tied to our African ancestry, our history and cultural heritage, our identity as a people (race). Therefore, we see complexity imbedded in the above questions about who we are, both in our individual (single) and multi-layered (multiple) identities. The underlying question then arises as to what it means to have both single (African) and multiple (African-American or African-Caribbean-American, etc.) identities? What is the experience and what does it mean to live in and through these experiences?

Even as we struggled to construct and communicate the meaning of these experiences, noting our differences, not as obstructions but as realities, we realised that it was not simply an issue of geographical location, class, status, etc. We realized that sharing who we are also includes the underlying issues of fear and suspicion which sometimes leads to distrust, anger, and violence. Therefore, there was the need for further and, if possible, frequent dialogue. This

⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Editors’ Introduction: Multiplying Identities,” in Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editors, *Identities* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

was seen as a necessary step to help clear the pathways for better understanding. This is because lack of dialogue breeds misunderstanding and misconception, and nurtures division which can eventually perpetuate violence, even within the same group of people.

Hope in Times of Hopelessness

Violence against women and girls is not only pervasive; it is also relentless globally.⁷ In 2000, Mercy Amba Oduyoye categorically stated that Third World women's theological reflections on the subject revealed that "wherever there is generalized violence, as in times of war, natural disasters, social upheavals, and ecological violence, women and children bear the brunt of the hardships. They also concluded that most violence against women is rooted in mutually reinforcing hierarchies of patriarchy and androcentrism in cultures, religions, and economic systems."⁸ This statement by Oduyoye is implied in the conference theme, so that even as we mobilized for the conference, we did so amidst violence.

Apart from our varied individual experiences of violence, our sisters from Liberia have lived through and saw their country go through violent wars that took a lot of lives. It was a situation in which their roles as sisters and mothers were tested to the core. Examples were given about instances where some women chose to save their own lives to the detriment of their babies and other family members. Although these examples were raised to challenge the often taken-for-granted notions of women as caring, nurturing and self-sacrificing, they also illustrated how

⁷ Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Violence, Institutionalized," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (London: Mowbray, 1996), 307-309.

⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Violence," in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella, MM and R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 237.

violence destroys our humanity by transforming our very core communal values into self-preservation. In quite a similar manner, our sisters from Nigeria are also going through sporadic violent times in which Muslims and Christians, particularly in Northern Nigeria, are at war with each other. In Ghana, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is still wearing her bangles which she has worn since 2000 to join in the protest against the murder of women.⁹ As for our sisters from the diaspora, silence sometimes speaks louder than words. For some of the sisters, even though the kinds of violence they experience in the US are not as overt as those in the West African conflict situations, they are very devastating. Largely perpetuated within the domestic environment, they include sexual, physical, economic and psychological violence. Thus traumatized by the complex nature of some of these violent situations, many sisters have literally veiled themselves in silence. It was at these times of sharing and reflections that our common humanity as women in the face of diverse forms of violence united us as women and girls, and far outweighed what divided us.¹⁰ What occurred is similar to a call once made by Patricia Ireland:

I want each of us to connect what is happening politically in the world and in our country to what is happening and will happen in our own lives, to understand the real, practical meaning of the aphorism “the personal is political.” Our actual everyday lives, our ability to live in a satisfying way, to fulfil our hopes and dreams – our ability to pursue happiness – are dramatically affected by the policies of the government and of the other institutions that shape our society as well.¹¹

⁹ Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, “Violence against Women in Contemporary Ghanaian Society,” *Theology and Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2006): 23. See also, Kathy Cusack and Takyiwaa Manuh, editors, *The Architecture of Violence against Women in Ghana* (Accra: Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, 2009), and Sheila Minkah-Premo, *Coping with Violence against Women* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2001).

¹⁰ See for example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind: Domestic Violence against Women,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan, et al (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 39-55.

¹¹ Patricia Ireland, *What Women Want* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 307.

Recognizing the commonality of violence in our lives, amidst all the differences, reflected the notable point that there is still hope, and we are all women of hope.

We know that as long as there is life, there is hope. One of the symbols of our conference (printed on the conference programme, booklet) was the traditional Akan symbol depicting a sense of hope. The symbol is known as *Oyame, biribi wo soro, ma enka yen nsa* (God, there is something above/in the heaven). The oral citation of this symbolic statement often concludes with “let it touch our hands.” Partly captured on the front cover of the booklet, this is both a symbol and a definitive expression of hope in traditional Akan society. This symbol formed an important part of the chief’s morning ritual. It is argued that in times past, this symbol used to be carved and hanged on the inside wall of the chief’s bedroom. Each morning, before he crossed the threshold of his bedroom door to get out, he would stretch out his hand, touch the symbol and reiterate the saying: “God, there is something above/in the heaven, let it touch our hands.”

Again, one of the Akan religious symbols that seeks to demonstrate the resilience of the African spirit, one that survives in spite of the situation in which it finds itself, is the *Oyame nnwu, na m’awu* (God does not die, so I shall never die). The basic belief is that *Oyame* (the creator), has left part of his spirit in us (*okra*-soul), so as long as this spirit is indestructible, the created beings are also indestructible. This definitely is a mark of hope. This hope is our inspiration, thus, even though the issue of violence against women and girls persists, we shall surely overcome. Gatherings like this, which give the platform for women to come out of their shells to publicly and honestly speak out, are some of the signs of hope.

Apart from the above expressions of hope in our traditional society, history tells us that there was once a “Door of no Return” in the slave dungeons at the Elmina and Cape Coast castles. But this door has become a “Door of Return.” Thus, even as we bemoan the past and current situations, we are filled with the kind of hope and conviction that kept Africans in the diaspora all these years and who now celebrate the “Door of Return” with us.

The second day’s plenary was led by Dianne Stewart. Although very enriching, Stewart’s presentation, once again, brought to the fore that which African women in the continent have cried over time and again, motherhood. Female scholarship and literature in African and its diaspora remains as an open landscape, waiting to be cultivated. Although motherhood is not a collective or homogenous concept, it mirrors the various circles of scholarship and literature available. Even so, it made us question our role as women of Africa and the diaspora. The question: “What is our epistemological premise and philosophical foundation for knowledge?” became one of the focal points of discussion alongside the concept of mothering. The question generated much discussion; many bemoaned the “disconnectedness and dislocation of knowledge,” especially women in the diaspora. The result of the discussion was recognizing the need to collaborate in research and publication. This initial deliberation was concluded on the final day when groups were formed to discuss the way forward.

The afternoon’s case studies on types of violence against women in Muslim communities, girl-child trafficking and *trokosi*¹² provided opportunities for small group discussions. Drawn

¹² *Trokosi* is a word from the people of Tongu in the Volta Region where virgin young girls of ages between five and twenty are sent into lifelong servitude in a shrine to “atone for the offences or crimes committed by members of the family.” See Mark Wisdom, “Focus on *Trokosi*: ‘What is *Trokosi* System?’” in *When Silence is No Longer an Option*, ed. Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Accra: Sam-Wood Ltd., 2002), 31-39.

from the Ghanaian society, presenters testified to the fact that we are indeed mobilizing amidst violence against women and girls.

Remembering Our Past

The trip to the castles (Elmina and Cape Coast) was an eventful one for all those who participated. In the company of the Queen Mother, the travellers were definitely in the best of hands. Those who went on the trip included women from the diaspora, Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana. For some of us, the trip to the castles was something we did not want to experience again. As such we stayed behind. But did that prevent us from remembering this aspect of our past or the pain, anguish and sorrow our sisters from the diaspora often feel and exhibit upon their visits to the castles? If some felt this was the case, it was an illusion to think that way. The anxiety and anticipation of what might be going on kept us emotionally and spiritually glued to our cell phones, as we who stayed behind constantly called to find out how they were doing. The castle experience has a way of unmasking and questioning previously conceived notions or held identities. Bringing us face to face with our historical past and present at the same time, a visit to the castles often serves as a catalyst for deeper and sombre reflections. This visit was no exception. For those of us on the continent, it is a sense of guilt, while for our brothers and sisters from the diaspora, it is a sense of betrayal.

We know that this sense of guilt and betrayal has to be overcome, so as to forge ahead in our aspirations for a common destiny. A passage from Bogumil Jewsiewicki entitled “Breaking

the Chains of Slavery” helps frame the way I am reconstructing my understanding of enslavement:

“Being chained up” and “breaking free” are two images, neither of which has a beginning or an end (much like the chicken and the egg debate), but which extend the experiences of slavery from the past into the present. The collective memory associated with such images also brings the experiences of slavery closer to the present; it exhibits a potential for narration and/or performance, it represents collective representations of absent moments and lost memories, it reveals how memory is culturally inherited (i.e., *patrimonialisé*), and how historical artefacts are indeed fact.¹³

The question arising is this: Are we still chained up or have we broken free, physically and mentally? The ones who did go on this particular trip observed the shock and the unimaginable difficulty with which some sisters tried to comprehend this historical reality. The sheer fact that historical edifices (artefacts) like these continue to share our space makes it difficult for some people to come to terms with the situation. The presence of the dungeons (male and female), the “Door of no Return” and the accompanying narratives (usually rendered by the tour guides) may be common features; but the emotional and sometimes physical breakdown of our sisters (and some brothers) from the diaspora often relates to how some of the women were sexually violated in these castles. In other words, the castles have become places of bringing out contradictions. With multiple identities and experiences of African and African diasporan persons being represented there (colonisation, enslavement and economic gain), the castles and the problems arising from the legacies of guilt and betrayal – being colonised and enslaved, or being victims and victimisers – are deep-rooted and spiritual.

¹³ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “In the Empire of Forgetting: Collective Memory of the Slave Trade and Slavery,” in *Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo, Mariana P. Candido and Paul E. Lovejoy (Trenton: African World Press, 2011), 1-2.

It is for this reason that the theme for the following day, “Rising from the Dust,” was most appropriate to me. That is, no matter how we sink into the pit or how dusty we become, we rise to a new day. Just as the “Door of no Return” is now transformed to a “Door of Return,” we rise up to reconstruct new identities and to rewrite our histories with hope, not forgetting our past but enriching and strengthening ourselves because we know our past. With brave hearts and determination, we are renewed and resolved with hope for the future.

Rising from the Dust

Processing the time spent together on this last day started with the rituals of renewal and self-affirmation. At the same time, it was also a ritual of rededication to the purpose of our being together. Consequently, the ritual was immediately followed-up with reflections on what it means to be African or African diasporan women mobilizing amidst violence perpetuated against us. This morning’s event was powerful, moving and insightful. With much soul searching, we knew that violence against women and girls is not only found in acts committed against our bodies through physical force or our psyches through language (verbal and nonverbal) and institutional structures or systems of governance, but that violence is also in ways of seeing, perceiving, labelling and naming ourselves as well as others. As such we noted that some identity constructs violate people and do so deeply.

As we (the women in the continent) came to understand, for black women and girls in the diaspora, their African root is a label by which they are easily identified (such as being named as

African Americans) and, sometimes, consequently discriminated against.¹⁴ Even though comparisons could be made with other third world nationalities like Asians and Latinos or other minority groups, these labelled brothers and sisters in the diaspora are sometimes shocked and shattered to discover that their African identity is questioned when they find themselves on the African soil. Viewed as Americans, the only thing that cannot be taken away from them is their colour. Yet, as much as the skin colour is a concern, it only provides a genetic identity and name, black. The question then is: Are they violated because of their colour or their claim to Africa? As someone reflected, “Who made me an African? Being African is a name given to me. We are responding to how we are named by the North. We are or remain Africans based on our relationship with the North.” It was within these moments and contexts that violence against women and girls transcended space, time and gender. Since she seemed to be echoing other people’s views (as they nodded and responded); she continued, “Although I now make this claim, it was a different place to be before now.” Resonating with this speaker, from another angle, someone observed that “It takes time and a personal spiritual journey to understand the trajectories of our life,” and, more so, to understand who you are especially if “both sides do not claim you.”

As we listened to each other, we soon discovered that despite the differences and depth of each situation or case, the problem was not a one-sided issue. Some of the women on the continent also raised issues of misconceptions, misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

Gradually, we acknowledged that these problems keep us apart, whether on the continent or in

¹⁴ Kirstin Boswell Ford, “A Home-place: Self-identity and God in African American Culture,” in *Another World is Possible: Spiritualities and Religions of Global Darker Peoples*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Marjorie Lewis (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2009), 313-330.

the diaspora. The question of labelling and naming others became an issue worth spending more time on.

We also observed that this identity struggle is not simply limited to being African women or African American women, but extends to our adopted religious traditions like Islam and Christianity. Inasmuch as we agreed that slavery or the word “slave” is a political, not technical, term, we resolved that the terminology used should be “enslaved.” We knew that our historical past (enslavement and colonization as evidenced by the castles) will continue to form and inform our identity constructions. Therefore, as black women with faiths not indigenous to our African continent, we will have to constantly renegotiate our lives in each and every environment and context. In doing so we do not just construct an identity, but we construct a multiplicity of identities. Consequently, the strength with which we continually renegotiate our varied identities provides the different shades of our resistance and hope. Even so, we agreed that “You name people what they name themselves and not what you name them.” This for me was the climax of the day; that we had arrived at the point of truth-telling with such comfort and tenacity of spirit was excellent and beyond my expectation.

It was, and still is, moments like these that Maya Angelou’s poem the “Phenomenal Woman” became important and relevant for me. Irrespective of all the challenges, these phenomenal women rose from the dust that morning to dramatize powerful episodes of violence against women and girls as well as discuss how to move forward from this conference. From the pit and dust in which we found ourselves that morning, we were beaming with hope by the close

of day. As Maya Angelou said, if I try to explain, you would “think I’m telling lies,” because you would wander where their secrets lay.¹⁵

Conclusion

Generally, my experience of the conference was very humbling. The entire period was a period of learning. As a member of the planning committee, I learnt a lot, and I believe the other members of the team learnt something as well. If nothing at all, I am sure they now have a new notion of the concept of time and punctuality, most especially, as GMT is proverbially understood as “Ghana Mean Time” and framed within a wider and deeper contextual time of relative responsibility. Even so, responsibility in this context, is not simply relative; it must also be understood within the womanist principles of inclusiveness (family, clan and community, and sometimes, self-sacrifice). This complex interconnectivity and reframing is nonetheless a problem that needs to be resolved. As Kwame Gyekye notes, one of the problems of Africans is how to reappraise our “inherited cultural traditions to help come to terms with the cultural realities of the times and, thus, to hammer out a new modernity on the anvil of the African people’s experience of the past and vision of the future.”¹⁶

Hope, not hopelessness, was and remains the reason for the gathering. It is about giving form, voice and, now, text to our dreams and desires. As they express themselves metaphorically into limitless rays of hope (peace, unity and love), we believe in a possible world without ethnic/

¹⁵ Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman,” available at feminist.com, access 27th October 2012, <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/insp/maya.htm>

¹⁶ Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), viii.

racial, class or gender-based violence. This hope rises from the depths of our beings, from which we are and from what we are becoming, as we reconnect and dialogue in our self-created spaces. African women have always created spaces within their busy schedules to network and dialogue. It was and has always been their way out and way forward; networking and dialoguing within work. It does not matter whether it is during farm work, fetching water or fuel wood, repairing or beautifying their compounds, these times also became their created spaces within which they networked and dialogued as women, as humans and as women of their families and communities. This, I realized, was reflected in our gathering. The period of gathering was not a free or recreational time, it was a time of networking and dialoguing. It was part of our working schedule, just like that of typical rural African women. For those of us in the academia, the gathering fell within two important components of our duties: research and community service. For the ministers of religion, it was part of their ministerial witnessing and evangelization, just as it was a time of educating and advocating for those in Non-Governmental Organizations for advocacy and activism.

Of course, there are different and many ways of seeing or interpreting, even by the same person or group. As I reflect on our recent gathering, brainstorming and sharing, I reinterpret and dare to understand a different shade of a book I have, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and a chapter I thought I understood by the same title. As Alice Walker wrote, "And perhaps in Africa over two hundred years ago, there was just such a mother."¹⁷ For me, this was not a mere wishful thinking. There was, were, and still are, if even they were and are few. We, women and girls of

¹⁷ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (London: The Womanist Press Ltd., 1984), 243.

Africa and its diaspora are a testimony of that. Yes, we are the “Daughters of Anowa” and we continue in hope. And now, with new and renewing ways of seeing, understanding and interpreting, we continue to open new chapters of our lives, like a spring, although the future is unknown. I know and will always remember that “Hope is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm.”

Even so, we may still wonder if this beautiful dream, full of hope and aspirations, will not be submerged by other pressing concerns of our contemporary global world. How do we keep this unity when African tradition and culture is currently losing value and ground? Can we hold on to this dream in spite of the distance between us? What is in store for the future, especially the children and grandchildren of the “Daughters of Anowa”?