MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AS PANACEA/PAINKILLER FOR AFRICAN WOMEN

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Abstract
In African societies the glaring gaps in policy, legal frameworks and investment opportunities make it difficult for women to perform to their full potential in social, economic and political spheres. The lack of support leads to their poor performance, lack of sustainability and perpetuate a culture of dependence in most parts of Africa. The constraints preventing African females from attaining socio-economic independence provide the context for an increasing attraction to strong religious commitment. This provides an expression of identity beyond the socio-cultural constraints of the traditional patriarchal African society. The central argument of this paper is that modern religions provide an expression of identity beyond the socio-cultural constraints of the traditional patriarchal African society. The idea of this ethnographic and sociological work is to show how these religions have helped maximized the potentials of African women against the marginalization they experience in Africa's traditional society.

Keywords: African, Women, Impact, Modern, Religious Movements, Panacea.

Introduction

In African societies, gender inequality manifests itself in a number of spheres such as the family, labour market, politico-judicial structures and in cultural-ideological productions.[1]Forexample the mass media sector in many African countries is male dominated leading to a male interpretation of the world which unfortunately has helped entrenched cultural stipulation against women. In spite of this gender inequality, it is important to recognize that women's empowerment is an integral part of national development, peace building and conflict-resolution. This means that gender roles and particularly women's roles as wives, mothers and custodians of religious knowledge and ritual practices can be potent symbols for women's emancipation and for cultural continuity. In African communities religion plays a prominent role to the extent that all aspects of life derive their relevance and sustenance from it.[2]

In African Religious sphere capabilities and responsibilities of men and women are not always biologically determined rather it becomes a space for engagement by both sexes to showcase their spiritual endowment and competence.[3]This has become a space which African women are seriously harnessing in order to prove their relevance in a male dominated world. This is because in the religious sphere gender roles assigned to men and women are significantly defined structurally and culturally in ways which create,

reinforce, and perpetuate relationships of female dominance both publicly and privately most especially with regards to African traditional religion.[4]

The degree of religious independence women enjoy in ritual space if extended to other sphere of life, it is believed will serve as a major stage in bridging inequalities. This will help in fostering self-esteem and well-being for them in a male dominated society. This paper addresses the issue of gender inequalities by looking at ways in which the cultural repertoire in the religious sphere which allow for the exploration of gender can contribute to women's empowerment in African societies.

Theoretical Framework

A careful look at Sub-Saharan Africa shows that the survival of many countries depends heavily on activities associated with women, which include textile production, food production, processing and preservation, beauty care, fashion, educating, and religious rituals. While state structures have often failed to recognize the concerns and worth of African women, religion has filled the void in answering needs left entirely unaddressed. The holistic paradigms of African religion, Christianity and Islam provide avenues for women to express their worth. The various roles they play on the spiritual level conveys messages beyond the apparent and provide multiplicities of expressions for analyzing gender and power relations in African polity.It is therefore important to examine the many ways women have made the religious sphere their fortitude in bridging inequalities. Methodology will be phenomenological and comparative with the use of books and oral interviews.

African Women and the Burden of a Patriarchal Society

The status of women in African societies and the world at large is a composite of many different variables, often casually independent from one another. Thus, in any given society, her status may be low in some domains of behaviour, approach equality with men's status in others and even in some domains surpasses the status of men.[5] Based on the above submission it is safe to conclude that each society has its own parameters for measuring the status of women. Irrespective of the status a woman may have in her society it is a common fact that many of them have borne the brunt of cultural traditions, many of which have been described as oppressive, and which limit their advancement.[6]

This is due to the fact that men are favoured in terms of accessing certain economically and socially significant materials and rights, such as access to land and property.[7]Also, due to skewed relations of power, women had limited legal capacity and consequently occupy subordinate positions. This subordination is vividly expressed in a Yoruba adage which says "*Okunrin loba lori Obirin*" meaning a man is lord over a woman and this is generally the popular belief in most African tribes.

Women in Africa and in many other parts of the world have been demanding to be treated equally and to be judged on the basis of their ability and intellect.[8]The continued

invocation of culture, sexuality and religion in order to treat women unequally is under constant well-grounded criticism, this is due to the realization that women empowerment are intricately linked to the survival of children and an improvement in the human condition. Bridging the wide gap in gender inequality is essential to the formation of a democratically sustainable society which aspires to social justice and human rights. This can only be achieved by addressing imbalances in families, communities and nations. The limitation of women in African societies despite civilization and globalization has resulted in their inadequate representations in decision-making levels and their opportunity to participate in different spheres of life. Majority of them do not enjoy the benefits of civilization but are to varying extents suffering from its negative effects such as low self-esteem and poverty.[9]

The erosion of the Matrilineal Order (a social system in which *females* hold the primary *power positions* in roles of *political* leadership, moral *authority*, social privilege and control of property at the specific exclusion of *males* - at least to a large degree) due to colonization is believed to be responsible for the poor status of women today in many African societies. Positions of power which women enjoyed particularly in pre-colonial Africa withered away with the introduction of dominant colonial powers. The colonial government categorically replaced the powerful female authority figures with dominant male powers this is particularly true of public and political positions.[10] A practical example of this is seen in the institution of Queen Mother among the Akan of Ghana and other African societies such as *Côte* d'Ivoire and Benin which has lost the parity it enjoyed within the rulership of many communities and states. A superficial demonstration of this is the fact that at public gatherings, Queen Mothers no longer sit at the same level with kings.[11] In pre-colonial Africa the Queen Mother and King or chief sit in state together with the king seated to the right of the Queen mother. The seating arrangements, demonstrated the authority and power the Queen Mother had over the King or Chief and thus showed their importance as being the right hand or brain of the King.[12] QueenMothers, along with other women in Africa under the colonial rule, lost "social, religious, constitutional, and political privileges and rights."[13]

The position of women in matrilineal societies is universally high, as they are the focus of the entire social structure, and are the link of channeling resource allocation and defining political and social relationships.[14] As a result, they wield considerable decision-making influence based on cooperation, harmonious coexistence and development. It is believed that "matrilineal structures are accommodating and integrative" while "patrilineal ones are acquisitive and internally divisive." Therefore, whereas patrilineal descent is associated with sexual inequality, whereas, matrilineal descent is associated with sexual equality.[15]

However, this does not mean we do not have record of patrilineal societies were women have excelled, for instance in Nigerian society before and after colonial rule, women have held rulership positions. For instance, the Ondo and Ekiti people of Nigeria have a bi-lineal system of succession that is both matrilineal and patrilineal. This means that in

such societies women were exalted, they were regents, co-regents, city founders, army commanders, officers, soldiers, and bodyguards.[16]Politically women such as Yeyenisewu in Ado-Ekiti and Eye Aro in Akure became traditional rulers. They both ruled during the fifteenth and sixteenth century respectively.[17] This is a custom that is still practiced till date inAkureland. When an Oba dies the first daughter of the king is installed the Regent pending when a new monarch (*Deji*) is chosen.In Akureland, the kingship system is arranged in such a way that you need to have a female child before you are made the *Deji* so that if the king should die, the daughter can be installed as the Princess Regent.[18]In Yorubaland, these female monarchs are addressed as **Kabiyesi** (*He Who No One Questions*), the same salutation that is offered to their male counterparts. Even the husband of the Regent is obliged by customs and tradition to address Her Majesty as **Kabiyesi** and observe the usual rites of obeisance and worship. Ondo and Ekiti States in the South Western region of Nigeria have some of the most colourful profusions of female regents in West Africa.

Queen Amina of Zazzau is another example of women who attained high political position in a patrilineal society. In the 15th century she ruled the Kingdom of Songhai in mid-Niger, she was said to be a warrior queen who waged successful campaigns against neighbouring territories. She was able to extend her empire to the Atlantic coast. It is said that she founded cities, received tributes from important chiefs, and was reputed to have introduced the cola nut.[19]

It is obvious that in pre-colonial Africa, women led from the front, at other times they did so from behind. They would advise the rulers and guide their communities. Post-colonial governments "continued with policies that undermined women's traditional authority." [20]Today, it is evident that women's absence in politics, especially traditional institutions has created an unequal distribution of power and resulted in women's concerns and rights not being adequately addressed.

Within the contemporary political culture, a number of actions have been undertaken by African leaders to bridge the gap of gender inequality. Key among these is the attempt to mainstream gender issues in development efforts such as agriculture, water, environment, industry, health, education, politics and decision making positions in order to influence politics that affect them directly. Women parliamentarians have taken to parliament key motions that will contribute to the empowerment of women, the most recent in Nigeria being the 2015 Gender Equality Bill which failed in the Senate based on religious principles.[21] Despite this, due to the undeterred attitude of Nigerian women, there have been reforms of some discriminatory practices through the use of the court system.For instance, the issue of the inheritance rights of women is nowamended to their favour especially widows in the Nigerian constitution.[22]

Globally, as a result of the advocacy work undertaken by Pan-African networks, the Durban African Union Summit in 2002 recognized the contributions of African women and civil society organizations and affirmed that without the full involvement and

participation of women the objectives of the AU could not be achieved.[23] Gender mainstreaming at the AU will invariably yield positive results for similar action at the national levels. For example, Departments of Gender have been set up in a number of ministries in many African countries such as Ghana and Kenya, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Gender and Social Services. This has ensured that gender inequalities are addressed at the national level and discriminative policies and laws repealed.[24]

This national intervention has also given birth to other networks such as the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and Femme Africa Solidarite, which seek to change the status of women and document women's achievements and knowledge as part of the process in education and peace respectively. FAWE has generated projects, which document and publish the life histories of women achievers ranging from policy makers to scientist, school heads and women leaders in traditional society. Academic Institutions have developed a number of Women's Studies programmes in African universities. These include the Makarere University of Uganda, University of Ibadan, Nigeria and The University of Ghana.

The main thrust of these programmes has been women and development. Courses have been developed in areas such as gender and development theory, sexuality and reproductive health, management, ethnology and gender, and economy and gender. Much of the research work could be termed as "impact studies" in other words; it has concentrated on the status of women and the effect of a variety of forces acting upon them. Important quantitative data and qualitative insights have been accumulated, some of which have made it possible to put forward powerful contributions to the elaboration policy and systems aimed at monitoring and improving the status of women. However, the notion that gender equality is "western" ignores the ideals and activities of the women's movement in many African countries as well as commitments to gender equality.

Religion in the New World Order: The Challenges for African Women

In the new world order there is the separation of the public and the private sphere this means that there is demarcation between the spirit world and the physical.[25]this is contrary to the African belief that religion permeates all institutions of life and derive their validity based on it.[26]Today, religion is confined to the sphere of private life in many secularist states around the world [27]while the public sphere is the focus of political and economic discourses. In secularist societies little or no attention is given to the private sphere because it is viewed as being personal and thus not related to the politics of the public. Despite the fact that women and men are viewed as equal citizens in the public sphere, unfortunately, this is not reflected in the people's socio-political and economic realities where men benefit more and women are oppressed within their own societies because they are women.[28]

Religion, in this case, can be seen as the only movement that is addressing the private sphere. This entails addressing issues ignored by the public sphere, which are mostly related to women. In Africa, for example, post-colonial nationalist/secularist movements included women's liberation as part of their slogans in their modernizing agenda. However, the process by which the modernizing agenda dealt with the question of women's rights and roles was in many ways based on a Western woman's reality rather than the grass-roots experience of African women. This simply means that, the discussion of women's role in the "public" was based on an imported notion of women's role, and the "private" was left to be regulated by religious traditions. This necessitates women having to choose between nationalist and feminist agendas in order to further their rights as individuals. Identity needs to be reformulated, specifically the nationalist/religious identity, in such a way as to make it compatible with a feminist perspective. The possibility of combining the national/religious and the feminist struggle has to be proposed in a way that will benefit them both equally.

African women realized, that the new modernizing agenda not only utilized the same patriarchal notions they were supposed to fight but that it was only related to the public sphere, leaving the private sphere untouched.[29] The so-called "Emancipatory measures directed at women (education, employment, legal reforms) by Post-colonial masters were never intended to lead to a renegotiation of men's existing privileges but merely to endow women with additional capabilities and responsibilities."[18] Such as the responsibility of shared economical responsibilities within the family structure. This has led to the creation of multiple layers of challenges faced by women. That is, those inherited by traditions that maintained certain practices and expectations despite modernization (e.g. female circumcision); and those imposed by an alien notion of the meaning of women's emancipation (such as the right to education).[30]

In many African countries today, secular laws were adopted in all aspects of governance except those related to the family code that include (marriage, divorce, inheritance etc,) and other aspects directly affecting women which are regulated by traditional and religious laws. Unfortunately, these laws are interpreted strictly from a perspective of male privilege, in a manner often more restrictive than actually exercised by tradition and religion. For example the law on divorce in most African societies do not favour women, thus after working all her life and contributing her income to her family, upon divorce a woman gets nothing of the family's accumulation to which she may have contributed. Women in this case find themselves losing on both ends: they are neither enjoying the freedom brought about by modernization nor the protection dictated by religious traditions leaving them vulnerable.[31]

Based on the imperfect nature of women's citizenship in Africa they have been forced to enhance their position through the "private," which is controlled by religion. Through this process, women seek to increase their security by engaging in revivalist movement. This is aptly discussed by Gaitskell in her discussion of the spread of Christianity in South Africa, where she points out how religion was seen to be one of the most "powerful ideological forces contributing to the ongoing centrality of the notion of motherhood in

African women's organizations."[32]World religion like Christianity and Islam are believed to offer motherhood a safe and a stable position. Motherhood as a social identity in religious thinking thus provides a "positive and assertive self-identity among women" and a "sense of self-worth from which to challenge various forms of oppression and, in the process, develop new strengths and capacities."[33]

In times when African societies are dealing with economic insecurity, increased poverty, and unemployment, women now find solace in religion as offering more security than the options provided to them by the public space. In that sense, the value of women's role is no longer determined by their "production, which is an important determinant of their status within the home and the public sphere. But [by] their control over the spiritual which is not gender restrictive in modern religious movements which offer a new panacea of opportunities to fill this void. Women in particular stand to gain through a newfound independence from traditional patriarchy and gerontocracy, and through leadership and responsibility in a new religious system.

Assessment of African Women's Religiosity in Modern Religious Movements

Women are increasingly aware of the holistic importance of religion in shaping their perceptions about their self-understanding and self-definition. This is more profound with regards to the modern religious movements such as the Charismatic movements like Pentecostal Christianity, African churches (Aladura movement), African traditional religion and its ritual space and the Islamic religious movements which are inclined towards less rigidity and more practicality which offer women an alternative community in the midst of unstable states and patriarchal societies.

The ideals of these religions provide support for women through their emphasis on sexual equality, glorification of their traditional roles in the society such as mothering, the active roles they have played in the history of the popular religions of the world such as Christianity and Islam and their response to economic insecurity. This makes these denominations more appealing compared to the organized religions such as the orthodox churches which appear to have less to offer in these new international and religiously or spiritually inspired movements. The need for a more accommodating and change inspired religious movement seems to be an inevitable consequence of the rigid attitude of the institutionalized religion.

The emphases on personal inspiration as the true source of power and authority rather than institutional hierarchies provide the means for women to challenge traditional African social structures. In these movements, there is respect for the dignity of women, members are equal and free individuals within a mutual support system, thus enabling individuals to take charge of their lives.[34]This network of support is obviously attractive to insecure females unable to attain economic or social independence yet keen to rise above their circumstances. They are encouraged to exercise responsibility by prioritizing leadership training, to which gender and age is no barrier.[35]Thisprovides "opportunities for [women and youth] ... to assert [themselves] vis-à-vis the positions of authority

occupied by the elderly."[36] Many are now founders of one religious movement or the other presiding over men this has helped to control their frustration over marginalization. For example, the challenge to Islamic patriarchy and religious freedom for women gave birth to women only mosque intended for and led by women located in china, Denmark, Los Angeles and the United Kingdom.[37]

These religious movements have also played crucial roles in empowering women economically. Through their emphasis on prosperity preaching and self-reliance they are told they can attain all heights through their trust in God. This promise of wealth to the faithful irrespective of gender, legitimizes and supports women's struggle for economic independence in African societies. It also makes their messages relevant to the realities of life for them, at the same time provides for their social needs, making the movement a promising force for the advancement of women in Africa. This explains the attraction of Muslim women to Sufism and other forms of mysticism that have a capacity for bringing together non-confessional and international groups of people for a common purpose. These groups are often interested not only in mysticism but in political, educational, and environmental issues. Thus, a politicization of religion, even mystical forms of it, takes place in for example Turkey (at annual gatherings of an international community celebrating the birthday of Sufi mystic Rumi) and in other parts of the world that are considered "secularized." [38]

Consequently, women join these new movements because they believe it identifies with their needs and provides the forum for their spiritual expression. By this they become active creators of a culture-in-the-making...a culture of freedom for self-actualization...thereby providing a reconstruction of the conservative roles women were expected to play in African societies and religion. They provide a "new world" for members, offering a secure "social space" away from the harsh realities of poverty and social marginalization.[39]Within such movements women operate as active agents seeking to advance their own interests through the revival of religious traditions; they are given different roles and responsibilities at different times of their lives and at each and every stage they are honored and respected for that which they do."[40]This provides a panacea for the marginalization they suffer in a patriarchal structure.

Conclusion

The paper discussed African Women and the Burden of a Patriarchal Society, and attempted to give an exposé of the challenges African women face in secularist states where religion is confined to the sphere of private life (which is contrary to African belief that religion permeates all institutions of life and derive their validity based) while the public sphere is the focus of political and economic discourses. Despite the fact that women and men are viewed as equal citizens in the public sphere, unfortunately, this is not reflected in the people's socio-political and economic realities where men benefit more and women are oppressed within their own societies because they are women. This necessitates women having to choose between nationalist and feminist agendas in order to further their rights as individuals. The attempt to dismantle the dichotomy of power

has propelled African women into joining the modern religious movements whose religious ideals provide support for women through their emphasis on sexual equality. This makes them more appealing compared to the orthodox denominations and their rigid doctrines. African women who support new religious movements are finding more promise of protection provided by tradition than provided by the modern state. For religious protection to become a reality, though, religious law and tradition will have to be redefined and renegotiated to reflect modern family structures and needs. Until that happens, the religious promise for safety and security for women will remain mythical.

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