

# Culture and Religion as Sources of Gender Inequality: Rethinking Challenges Women Face in Contemporary Africa

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## Summary

The aim of this article is to explore how the contentious issues of culture and religion remain sources of gender inequality and oppression for most women in Africa. Culture refers to the “learned and ideational aspects of human society” (Jenks 1993: 9). In its subjectivity, culture carries the illusion of shared concerns and values in the face of the real and contentious divisions that exist among classes, gender, race and ethnic groups. Religion refers to what people believe in; their spirituality and how this shapes people’s relation with each other and with God – the Almighty. In this article, the concept of “gender” shall be taken to mean roles that are ascribed to men and women. More often than not, these roles can be presented as if they are “fixed”, “unchangeable” and “incontestable”. Culture, religion and gender are problematic terminologies that merit analysis within the context of how these are used in some African communities to justify the oppression of women. In this endeavour, the article will pay special attention to how factors such as biblical notions of the creation of man, polygamy, cultural beliefs on spirit mediums, education, violence, forced marriages, women and property ownership, as well as cultural practices such as circumcision have informed cultural and religious decisions to justify the oppression of women in contemporary Africa. The central argument of this article is that since culture and religion are socially constructed, the manner in which they define gender roles in Africa can be challenged. The idea is to interrogate, deconstruct and demystify gender stereotypes that are constructed by culture and religion to discourage women from participating fully in the development of contemporary Africa.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel se oogmerk is om ondersoek in te stel na die omstrede vraagstukke van kultuur en godsdiens, en hoe dit steeds vir die meeste Afrikavroue bronne van genderongelykheid en verdrukking is. Kultuur is die “aangeleerde en ideasionale aspekte van die menslike samelewing” (Jenks 1993: 9). Kultuur is subjektief, maar dit skep die illusie van gedeelde belange en waardes in die teenwoordigheid van die werklike en omstrede skeidings tussen klasse en gender-, rasse- en etniese groepe. Godsdiens is dit waarin mense glo; hulle spiritualiteit en hoe dit gestalte gee aan mense se verhoudinge met mekaar en met God – die Almagtige. In hierdie artikel

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verwys die konsep "gender" na die rolle wat aan mans en vroue toegewys word. Dié rolle kan meestal aangebied word as "vas", "onveranderlik" en "onweerlegbaar". Kultuur, godsdiens en gender is problematiese terminologieë wat ontleding verdien in die konteks van hulle gebruik in sommige Afrikagemeenskappe om die verdrukking van vroue te regverdig. In die strewe hierna skenk die artikel veral aandag aan faktore soos Bybelse idees oor die skepping van die mens, poligamie, kulturele oortuigings oor spiritistiese mediums, onderwys, geweld, gedwonge huwelike, vroue en eiendomsreg, en kulturele praktyke soos besnydenis wat tot bepaalde kulturele en godsdienstige besluitneming lei om die verdrukking van eietydse vroue in Afrika te regverdig. Die sentrale argument van die artikel is dat die wyse waarop kultuur en godsdiens genderrolle in Afrika definieer, uitgedaag en beveg kan word omdat kultuur en godsdiens konstrueer van die samelewing is. Die idee is om genderstereotipes (wat deur kultuur en godsdiens gekonstrueer word om die volle deelname van eietydse vroue aan die ontwikkeling van Afrika te ontmoedig) te bevraagteken, te dekonstrueer en te ontsluit.

## **Culture and Religion as Sources of Woman Oppression in Africa**

The creation of man in the Bible is used by some African men to oppress women. Acker (1987) points out that, according to Christianity, a woman was not created from the dust of the earth but from Adam. A number of verses in the Bible limit the advancement of women in Africa and make male dominance an obstacle to gender equality. For example, Gen 1: 26 says God created man in his own image. In the same breath, Gen 3: 16 asserts that "... he shall rule ..." while 1 Cor 11: 7-9 echoes the ideas that "a man ... is the image and glory of God; but a woman is the glory of man". For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. A cursory glance to the ideas espoused by the above verses seems to suggest that men were given the power to rule over women. Yet, the same verses can be interpreted differently by different people. What is worrisome is that in some African Christian sects the above verses and chapters are often [mis]quoted by some men to justify the oppression of women.

In African culture, men exercise their power over women by marrying many wives. Lan (1985) points out that a man has the right to marry as many wives as he wants. Summers (1999) adds an interesting dimension by saying that a man is considered to be a man with many wives and children. The above assertions are culturally constructed by men because when God created a man, according to the Bible, He did not say, "let us create a human being whom we call a man when he marries many wives". Yet, the Gen 3: 16 text "... he shall rule ..." seems to have created a host of problems, for women have to bear being ruled by men holding a Bible as an instrument of oppression. Interestingly, those men who have parochial understanding of that verse often refer to it without considering its social, political and economic ramifications. In other words, it is the same verse that makes it

possible for some men to discriminate against women so that they fail to make meaningful contributions to their families and communities.

Within the sphere of African spirituality, the suppression and exploitation of women goes beyond the grave. Writers such as Beach (1988), Lan (1985) and others who write about spirit possession among Africans never mention the spirit of a dead woman possessing a man (spirit mediums), yet women are always possessed by the spirit of the dead man. Acker (1987) further complicates the above assertions by saying that ancestral spirits from the mother's side are not important as those of the father's side. He argues further that women are not allowed to appease angry ancestral spirits; this is done by fathers and brothers. The implication is that boys are able to take the position of their fathers as grown-ups so as to preside over all matters to do with spirit possession and spiritual appeasement within a family. However, the very fact that a woman can be possessed by a spirit medium, testifies to the cultural significance of women. Spirit possession bequeaths power to a woman, for example, society ceases to view a woman as a weakling and instead views her as a "super-human being" that operates above other community members. Yet, to respect or glorify women "only" if they happen to be possessed by spirit mediums, seems to confirm the belief that women can only be given due respect if they do double the work of men or if they possess supernatural or metaphysical powers that men cannot control or restrict.

Locating sites of women oppression, Cooray and Potrafke (2014) point out that in some African cultures boys are made to pursue education or some career of their own choice so that they are intellectually prepared for being leaders of their homes, thereby receiving the powers to rule. Put differently, some African parents invest in the education of a son believing that he will take care of them when they are old. Some parents in Zimbabwe clearly tell their daughters that they should respect their brothers because they are the fathers of tomorrow (Rwafa 2012). From a broader perspective, investing in the education of a son can be the root of some problems between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law expects to get something from her investment in her son's education, and yet the daughter-in-law sees it as her legal right to enjoy the material benefits that her husband brings to their home. The conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law reflects the depths of the competition between African women, controlled by the very same oppressive patriarchal structures that they seek to interrogate, denounce and destroy. By extension, the conflict shows the subtle ways in which women respond – consciously or unconsciously, to the dominant cultural and ideological structures that constantly strengthen the power of men to control them. In the same forte, Rossano (2008) points out that in some Islamic sects in Africa that support extremism or fundamentalism, girls are not allowed to go to school, and that western-educated girls can actually be punished by death. This assertion may not be far-fetched if one

considers that the religious *Jihad* currently being carried out by Nigeria's Boko Haram (literally meaning "western culture is forbidden") is partly motivated by the desire to destroy all aspects of western education, and that girls are being used as religious and ideological punching bags in a conflict that pits terrorists against the Nigerian government. What started as a religious war meant to cleanse Nigerians from the so-called western influence has ended up affecting girls that are culturally stereotyped as "soft-targets" (Chari 2010: 333) in media discourses. Similarly, in other cultural sites such as film, theatre and music women are still represented as sex objects whose inescapable destiny is to quench male sexual appetite. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged among members of a culture; it involves the use of a language of signs and images which can be essentialised to give an illusion of reality. Tumusiime (2010: 1), an academic from Uganda, writes that "... representations of women in contemporary Ugandan art serve cultural and political purposes through which male artists have invoked gender ideologies in their works as tools to silence women whose public presence is unwanted". From a religious perspective, Acker (1987) adds that a devout Muslim man would stop praying when a woman or a donkey appears. The foregoing examples clearly show how culture and religion are used to exacerbate inequalities between men and women.

In the African traditional culture, if a couple fails to have a baby, the woman is identified as the culprit sometimes without any attempt made to find the root cause of the problem. The pressure that a woman feels can be too much, to the extent of eroding the her "voice" which can be the only tool that she uses to alert society about the presence of social, cultural, economic and political forces that conspire against her progress. Moto (2009) testifies that in Malawi a childless woman in the Blantyre township of Ndirande stole a baby following intense and unbearable pressure from her husband and his relatives demanding that she must conceive. The "hegemonic masculinity" (King 2009: 370) demonstrated when a woman is blamed if couples fail to have a baby is embedded in the African notion and belief systems that a man is always sexually virile. Hence, the African saying that, "a man is as old as he feels" when it comes to matters to do with sex and sexuality which is a confirmation of the presence of unquestioned male powers that they can use at will to sexually exploit women.

### **Culturally Constructed Stereotypes as Sources of Woman Oppression in Africa**

In most African cultures, men are described as hard, difficult and brave. Dover (2005) writes that men are stubborn and not easily deflected from their purpose while women are taught to be humble and respect men. What

is true is that these are mere stereotypes constructed by the patriarchal culture to discourage women from participating fully in the development of contemporary Africa. Muponde (2005) concurs with Dover (2005) when he says that rural women in Zimbabwe are expected to be pure and innocent in order to give sexual pleasure to the husbands. Along the same line of thinking, Harbitz (1995) argues that women with rural backgrounds are backward as they rebuke their modern counterparts, saying it's for Europeans (Ndezve *chirungu*). Harbitz (1995) further notes that African culture has made rural women to believe that they are morally superior to urban women while, on the other hand, Muponde (2005) seems to be saying that traditional culture is still strong in rural areas and that it is often used to monitor the behaviour of women. Both authors do, however, acknowledge the reality that the oppression of women knows no boundaries – whether it happens in cities or rural areas. The level of oppression may, however, differ owing to the fact that through exposure to many experiences, city women can be conscious and prepare to confront forces that seek to stifle their development, unlike women who reside in rural areas. Such assumptions should, however, not be cast in stone simply because culture is “dynamic and liminal” (Turner 1967: 93) where the slippage of cultural signification, “... is celebrated in the articulation of difference” (Bhabha 2004: 235). With the advent of new media technology such as cell phones, internet, and social media channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp, more and more women – both in cities and rural areas – are getting information that has contributed to the development of their social and cultural consciousness. To construct a binary of city women versus rural women is to promote a grand cultural narrative which can readily be exploited by some men who seek to create some misunderstandings among women so that they prevail over the conflict as honest brokers.

In some African societies, women traditionally had no power over their bodies to the extent that they were forced into marriages. Lan (1985) points out that, during the 15th century, Mutota told his sons that anyone who had the courage to have sexual intercourse with their sister Nehanda would inherit from him. Nebedza succeeded in sleeping with his sister and married her. In this case, Nehanda would not have had the chance to contest such a proposition since all was done in keeping with African tradition and culture. In the same breath, a report made by Sachiti – a *Herald* editor – says that one out of ten girls in Mozambique is married before the age of fifteen (*The Herald*, 4 September 2014). What can be deduced from the foregoing is that Mozambican girls are forced into marriage by the situation at home, and that their parents are centrally involved in facilitating such forced marriages. The girls are victims because they are not old enough to decide what they want to do with their lives.

An interview with two members of Johanne Marange Apostolic Church was concluded with the shared realisation that almost all religions in the

world suppress women, and that the only difference was in the degree to which women are suppressed. The interviewees argued that, in Africa, women are suppressed differently according to the doctrine of each church. For instance, women in the Johanne Marange Church are not allowed to assume leadership positions that would make them speak in front of the congregation. This is substantiated with verses such as 1 Cor 14: 34 where women are ascribed supporting roles, rather than roles that place them in leadership positions.

### **African Customary Law and the Oppression of Women in Africa**

African cultures prevent a married woman from being critical or from challenging her husband on any family issues, including their material well-being. According to Vambe and Mfarisen (2011) under African customary law a married woman is perceived as an unpaid servant of the husband: she works for him, looks after children, and acquires and preserves property for him. African traditional culture has done great damage to how women should be viewed in relation to property ownership. In Zimbabwe, although the state attempted to repeal some African customary laws inherited from colonialism that contributed to the oppression of women, more is still to be done to enforce laws that provide women with status equal to that of men in terms of property ownership. Lan (1985) writes that women's domain is the household and the garden. When a woman's domain is confined to the domestic sphere, there is clearly a conscious plan among some men to actually stifle the development of women by viewing them as less enterprising. This widens the gap of inequality between men and women in contemporary Africa.

### **African Marriage Systems as Sources for Women Oppression**

In African culture, a married woman is trained to respect and obey her husband as he is said to be the head of the family. Wolffe (1992) says that cultural biases prevent women from reporting injustice and violations especially when this relates to their sexuality. For instance, it is viewed as unnatural and disrespectful for a married woman to decline a husband's intention of having sex with her. By implication this means that a married woman has no control over her body in matters to do with sex, but that she has power to decorate her body until she looks attractive so that the body can be ravished by her husband. Sachiti observes that migration in Southern

Africa is a burden as men usually indulge in unprotected sex with different partners and when they come home their wives still have no power to negotiate for condom use (*The Herald*, 4 September 2014). In Zimbabwe, a Shona woman is rendered powerless simply because she is the married one who cannot tell a man what to do regarding sexual intercourse. Kaimila-Kanjo in Moto (2009) accuses an African woman of lacking confidence to say no to the sexual advances of her husband if she is not in the mood for it. However, the above is a sweeping statement in that it views all women as people who lack confidence in matters relating to sexual intercourse. In a way, the statement supports patriarchal ideologies which view women as inferior to men. Gender ideologies are powerful tools for cementing domination over others since their force is entrenched within gender systems that pervasively shape the social experience of men and women (Silverbitt 1987). African traditional cultures socialise women to submit to the demands of men.

African culture exacerbates inequality by promoting domestic violence against women. Hanke (1992) notes that in some African societies beating a wife is viewed as a sign of love. Yet, domestic violence is one way in which men exercise their hegemonic masculinity over women. Most traditional cultures in Africa are implicated in constructing stereotypes that bring inequality between men and women. Wolffe (1992) points out that the cultural practice of *unyango* of the Dingo of Tanzania taught girls how to behave when they are married, how to take care of their bodies and how to relate to men. In Malawi, the cultural practice of *chinamwari* is meant to train teenage girls in techniques that will satisfy a man during sexual intercourse. Similarly, the circumcision of girls (female genital mutilation) in the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania) is done with the underlying motive of denying a woman sexual pleasure, because this is considered the preserve of men. From the few examples given above, it is clear that traditional cultures from different African countries contribute to the sexual objectification of women, and this discourages them from participating fully in the development of contemporary Africa.

The idea that men should be viewed as superior to women affected some writers like Fanon (1967). On the first page of his book, *Black Skin White Mask*, Fanon writes that this book should be read by every black man with a desire to understand himself and the forces that conspire against him. This assertion draws a demarcation line between men and women on the basis of their biological make-up. The fact here is that Fanon made some sweeping statements in which men are considered to be more educated than women. However, contemporary Africa now shows that more and more women are being educated and receiving formal training. Women therefore cannot generally be seen as illiterate as Fanon would like us to believe.

## Conclusion

This article explored how culture and religion are used to oppress in contemporary Africa. It was argued that, since culture and religion are not stable in both their conceptualisation and practical manifestations, they can be challenged and deconstructed by people actively involved in finding alternative ways of defying gender inequalities in African societies. This article has shown how chapters and verses in the Bible are used by some men to justify gender inequality in African societies. In the spiritual realm, women seem to be given due respect, but the fact that female spirit mediums are usually possessed by a male ancestor serves to legitimise the power of a male figurehead over women. In cases where young women acquire education, and are poised to pursue rewarding careers, these women are considered as problematic because, according to patriarchal dictates, they are bound to be disrespectful to their husbands. This assertion is atrophied because it borders on false assumptions that are constructed by a patriarchal language of stereotyping careering women. This article has also shown that the stereotypes that are built upon the roles that women play in society and culture are merely social and religious constructs that can be contested or dismissed on the basis of their falsity. It was argued that African traditional culture and religion are implicated in constructing damaging stereotypes that contribute to social, political and economic inequalities between men and women in Africa. The article has shown that African customary law uses aspects of African traditional culture to undermine the capacity of women to own children and property, and that this has a negative impact on the development of a woman who needs to take custody of children and property if her husband dies. In most cases, a woman is stripped of all the properties that she worked for together with her husband, and this leads to her impoverishment together with the children. The article highlighted that the stereotypes built upon the sex, sexuality and gender roles of African women are damaging and should be dismissed with contempt because they undermine the capacity of women to contribute positively to their societies in particular and Africa in general. Furthermore, cultural stereotypes naturalise the social conditions of women and thereby perpetuate gender inequalities between men and women. For Africa to develop fully, Africans should begin to value the contribution of women in society and culture without looking down upon them as “soft targets” or weaker sexes.

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