

PATRIARCHAL INFLUENCE ON THE RIGHT OF WOMEN OVER THEIR BODIES

Mayokun Joyce OLOWONIYI

Abstract

Men often take undue advantage over women on their bodies. In the African traditional societies and beyond, several debates have been ongoing on the need for the women folk to regain their full freedom without taking into cognisance the main reason behind this dominance. In the actual sense of it, African men take advantage of women in the African society majorly because of the authority which the society accords the African men as a result of the Patriarchal cultural practice which is traditionally inherent within the African society. This patriarchy has directly and indirectly affected the economy as well as the power structure in the African society. This paper attempts an examination of the patriarchal influence on the rights of women over their bodies. It aims at submitting that there is a need to merge patriarchy with women freedom as a blend for the development of our society so that the women will at least be able to live as human. The methods of historical and critical analysis, reflective argumentation and oral interview were adopted to pursue the aims of this study.

Keywords: Patriarchy, freedom, culture, oppression, proverb

Introduction

The question of whether a woman should have control over her body has been on for several years and it has been variously debated by scholars as one of the major focuses of contemporary discusses. Some scholars argued against it while others argued in support. Most of the debates, however, seem to argue in support of the claim that a woman should have right over her body. Proponents of this line of argument seem to argue in the light of the Western influence on the female gender. However, much attention has not been placed on this discussion in the light of the reality obtainable within the Africa's patriarchal culture. Hence, this study aims at examining this question, putting what is central to the African patriarchal society into consideration and in its proper perspective. The paper divides to three sections. The first gives the historical background to the patriarchal culture in Africa, with major reference to the Yoruba tribe. The second section examines the major factors responsible for the quest for the freedom of the female gender while the last attempts a justification for the quest and concludes that the right of a woman over her body is dependent and cannot be over and above the Africa Patriarchal orientation and world views. However, this should be done with the mind of rejecting derogatory and harmful cultural values while retaining unarmful cultural values without destroying them under the guise of civilization. The methods of historical and critical analysis, reflective argumentation and oral interview were adopted to pursue the aims of this study.

Historical Background to the Patriarchal Culture in Africa

The word 'culture' has been defined severally by scholars; however, it has been commonly defined as the way of life of a people and it includes their customs, tradition, beliefs, behaviour, way of dressing, modes of speech or language, without neglecting their works of arts as well as their attitudes to life among other things. Culture varies from one society to another and it is dynamic (Abdi 2010). This work emphasises the culture of the Yoruba people of Nigeria in Africa, being the culture I am most familiar with in Africa. Yoruba represents a West African group that inhabits West Africa. The majority of this group is from southwest Nigeria and they predominantly belong to the Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos, parts of Edo, Kwara, and Kogi States.

Although Yoruba societies do not enjoy a long written historical background, yet, from some of the oral traditions which were transferred from one generation to another and from the cultural practices of the Yoruba people in terms of their proverbs, Odu Ifa corpuses, taboos, familyhood, property acquisition versus inheritance, marriage and widowhood rites, etc. one can obviously demonstrate the kind of treatment, the women folk is subjected to.

The Yoruba nation like many other African societies is essentially a Patriarchal society. A patriarchal society is defined as that '...which is characterised by male super ordination and female subordination' (Ubrurhe 1999:82). Men show superiority over women. According to (Okome, 2002; Akintan, 2013) as cited by (Dogo, 2014), the consensus among writers is that the Nigerian society (of which Yoruba is a part) is patriarchal in nature. It is a society where gender roles are distinct and evident, and gender relations are informed by the dynamics of patriarchy which casts women in a subordinate role to men (Dogo, 2014). A patriarchal society is therefore one which strengthen the 'masculinity feminine dichotomy' by favouring and perpetuating male domination; and as such, in all areas of the society, structures are manipulated to maintain and foster the domination of women by men (Dogo 2014).

In the Yoruba society, there are clear gender roles and right from birth, a child is cast in the roles ascribed for the sexes by the society and these roles confine the sexes to appropriate manner of behaviour and areas of life endeavour. This is why feminists believe that sex as a concept is biological while gender is cultural and sociological.

In the Yoruba society, gender is associated with sex from birth. From birth, the male child is preferred to the female, and that is why when a child is born in Yoruba land, the first question is often is 'is it a boy or a girl?' (Olabode 2009) and even throughout childhood and adolescence, boys and girls are treated differently and assigned different roles. Although Oyewumi (1997) in her studies of the Oyo- Yoruba society argues that there is no concept of gender in the Yoruba culture. She bases her claims on the fact that the Yoruba language has no gender markers. She further observes that the Yoruba language has no word for 'woman'. For her just one word in the language, 'obirin', denotes female, while 'okunrin' denotes male. 'Obinrin' according to her does not derive from 'okunrin', the way that 'woman' derives from 'man' p 33. For Oyewumi, 'obinrin' is not in any way inferior to 'okunrin', and there are no markers in the Yoruba language that distinguish names, occupation, profession, status and so on in terms of gender. Yoruba language for her has no gender-specific words for son, daughter, brother or sister (Oyewumi 1997). Apart from the fact that Oyewumi's claim committed a fallacy of hasty generalization by

making conclusions on the whole Yoruba society based on her account of the Oyo society alone which is an infinitesimal part of the Yoruba society as a whole, her claims failed to identify the Yoruba society as a patriarchal one. The male and female hierarchical relationships were not just introduced by the Western colonisation as she claimed, rather they were coded in the performance of Yoruba language and not merely in the language.

Key Factors Responsible For Women Suppression in Yoruba Culture

Patriarchy is a key concept in the Yoruba tradition society. This patriarchal culture is such that is filled with languages that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women (Odunyoye 2002). As a concept, Patriarchy has been defined and recreated by feminists in their quest to understand and analyse the origins and situation of the domination of women by men. As such some the term has been used by feminists to refer to the 'systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination'. (Ferreira (2004) describes patriarchy as a system that is both oppressive and discriminatory. She believes that it is oppressive in all areas of society, including social, economic, political and cultural; discriminatory in its control of access to power, management of resources and benefits, and in manipulation of public and private power structures (395). In the words of Cynthia Cockborn (2004), patriarchy is a system in which leadership, authority, aggressiveness and responsibility reside in men and masculinity; while nurture, compliance, passivity and dependence are part of women and femininity.

African (Yoruba) women have always been noted for their salient roles such as parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual in the society. Yet, specific economic and cultural issues leave most women at the mercy of men. Often times, women are confined to the four walls of the family home, restricting their activities to procreation and household chores. Within the Yoruba patriarchal society, being married is a sign of respectability, whilst single mothers, unmarried and divorced are stigmatized. However, marriage is a key factor for the oppression of women. Many women struggle to attain economic independence, and socio-cultural and political encumbrances steeped in patriarchy put women in a position of bondage. Women find it difficult to live up to their full potentials with their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres (Osimeh et al 2018). Even with their roles as mothers and wives, they have limited time and opportunities to participate in economic, commercial, business, financial, educational, political, and even religious activities. Within the culture, even when a woman is of age and she is yet to be married or maybe a single mother, the society believes such is not responsible and even have words like 'adalemosun' which are derogatively used against such. Female subordination in Africa takes intricate forms grounded in patriarchal tradition and culture. Though education is accessible to women in Nigeria for instance, culture still subordinates women. Marriage therefore in the Yoruba society is like a necessary evil.

Another major issue predominant in our culture and which accounts for women oppression is our Yoruba proverbs, folklores and the Ifa Corpus. Balogun (2010: 22) observes that the oppression of women is fostered in Africa through cultural vehicles such as proverbs. Generally speaking, proverbs are regarded in the thinking and communication process of the Yoruba people and it touches a wide array of human concerns and activities but attention has not been largely placed on the connection between Yoruba proverbs and the oppression of women. But as Temitope Balogun notes, 'proverbs have served as major avenue for the continued perpetration of gender

discrimination among Africans (Balogun, 2005: 39). Although Balogun (2010) attempted a way through which the pervasiveness of the oppressive proverbs can be overcome, but this paper argues that his suggestions are not as realistic as he suggests they are.

Yoruba proverbs and folklores is an integral part of people's consciousness and often assumes the appearance of a natural, God-designed element of existence. This is why many women do not see their position and status, In relation to men, as disempowering. Though many people tend to think that it is a literary form of the past, it is still an integral part of daily living. 'Gendered proverbs' for example unconsciously influence the way we relate to the opposite sex and even to members of the same sex. Proverbs serves as mirrors of the cultural values of communities, they are used to buttress a point and to give an argument a cloak of general acceptability in Yoruba land. Hence Yorubas holds that 'ologbon wo ni ko mo idi owe' meaning that 'no one is regarded as wise, if he does not understand proverbs' Proverbs are admitted as truths obtainable in our society but they have gone a long way in further cementing the inferior status linked with the female sex. Many proverbs ridicule women and they have contributed to the negative traits often attributed to women, such as envy, gossip, greediness, materialism, evil, sexually insatiable, selfishness, etc. hence proverbs has been used to belittle and degrade women. Proverbs in Yoruba land are often used to drive home a point.

Although Ogunwale (1998) asserted the existence of some proverbs which also demean the masculinity in the Yoruba Proverbs yet it can be argued that the proverbial oppression of women with the Yoruba proverbs are more pronounced than that of men. Some of the proverbs which are derogatory for the women folk are:

1. B'obinrin ba gbon l'agbonju, penpe laso oko re e mo'. Meaning 'a husband's undersized clothe is an indication that his wife is excessively cunning"
2. Obinrin leke, obinrin l'odale' meaning 'the woman is a gossip, the woman is a traitor"
3. Okunrin ti ko ku, obinrin re ni ko I tii paa' meaning 'a man is yet to die because his wife his yet to kill him'
Even some seeming positively writing proverbs are loaded with meanin against the women folk, such as '
4. Ka pe were l'oko iyawo, ko le je ka'raye lo' meaning 'let's call a mad man a groom, such that he would allow us to have our way' . the implication of this is that the mad man is deceived as if to be a groom is the best thing that can happen to a man, there is more to life after marriage in the hand of a woman.

All these proverbs and many more are actually demeaning to the women folk.

Justifications of the Quests for Freedom: The Way Forward

The question of whether a woman should have a right over her body becomes a moral issue to be addressed because of the debate on the idea of freedom and right entailed in the Yoruba culture.

Women need to be free from several forms of abuse, that culture, ideologies, innovations etc. has placed on them. This is because as Shugarts observes 'that which constitutes the female has suffered quite possibly the worst universal ideological abuse ever to be

perpetrated on an abstract category' (Shugarts 1994:18). The women folk have been suffering in abstraction due to the burden placed on them by the virtue of the patriarchal nature of the society.

Attempts to classify the Nigerian cultural structure into the ideological frameworks of the Western world on the issue of the control of the woman body are merely an attempt to impose a completely theoretically strange ideological edifice upon the African cultural structure. However, there is the need to recognize the value and contributions of women if the Yoruba society or any other is to discover and actualize its full potential. Hence, there is the need to merge patriarchy with a 'limited version of women freedom' as a blend for the development of our society.

To achieve this, in marriage which has been identified as one of the factors of oppression, the husband (man) should not impose himself over the wife (woman). The responsibilities which are solely the traditional imposed duties of the women, should be shared, the women should even be encouraged by the men to actualize their potentials without the four walls of the home and so on. The women should be empowered to work and the men should not see it as a threat. There should also be forms of gender empowerment such that there will be gender-neutral concepts which seek to modify gender relations in complimentary context rather than in a conflicting perspective. Furthermore, rather than reconstructing the proverbs that we have in the Yoruba culture like Oyewumi suggested, there can be a form of social engineering and construction such that there will be sensitization and awareness from the grassroots level to the highest levels of the society through educating and consultations with all stakeholders beginning from the traditional leaders and guardians/ custodians of culture about what is needful.

About the derogatory proverbs, Ifa corpus, taboos, although they may not be easily changeable as Oyewumi suggested, yet, opportunity should be given to the women folk to complement by jointly collaborating with the men in the building of the society. It also entails a change of mentality for the women folk in the interpretation as well as the performance of the proverbs. They should, through good and virtuous character change the mind set of their men counterparts. This is because these proverbs could have been captioned based on generalization from within the culture overtime. This may actually lead us to the question about the origin of proverbs, but this is not within the scope of this paper but can be a useful philosophical research to be addressed at another time. Women and men should see these derogatory proverbs as an 'indeterminate language' which is coded in performance but can be acted out in good traits for a good portrayal of the women folk.

Conclusion

This paper examined the question of whether a woman should have control over her body in the light of the reality obtainable within the Africa's patriarchal culture. This paper examined the question by putting what is central to the African patriarchal society into consideration and in its proper perspective. The paper analysed the historical background to the patriarchal culture in Africa, with major reference to the Yoruba tribe. The second section examined the major factors responsible for the quest for the freedom of the female gender within the Yoruba culture and concludes that the right of a woman over her body is dependent and cannot be over and above the Africa Patriarchal orientation and world views. However, this should be done with the mind of rejecting derogatory and harmful

cultural values while retaining unarmful cultural values without destroying them under the guise of civilization. It however submits that there is a need to merge patriarchy with a 'limited version of women freedom' as a blend for the development of our society so that the women will at least be able to live as human.

References

- Abdi, A.A. 2010. 'Globalisation, Culture and Development; Perspectives on Africa' in *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*. Accessed on April 14, 2016 from www.japss.org
- Akintan, O.A. (2013). Powerful and Powerless: Women in Religion and Culture in Traditional Ijebu Society. *Journal of Social Science*, Vol.3 No 22
- Balogun O.A. (2010) 'Proverbial Oppression of Women in Yoruba African Culture: A Philosophical Overview' in *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK) New Series* Vol.2. No 1, pp 21-36
- Dogo, S.A. (2014) The Nigerian Patriarchy: When and How in *Cultural and Religious Studies*, Vol.2. No 5, 263-275. Doi:10.17265/2328-2177/2014.05.002
- Ogunwale, J.A. 1998 'The Derogation of Masculinity in Yoruba Proverbs'. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol.7 No 1, pp 103-113
- Okome, M.O. (2002) Domestic, Regional and International Protection of Women against Discrimination: Constraints and Possibilities. *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol.6 No 3
- Olabode, B.O. (2009) African Gender Myth in Proverbs and Verbal Discourses: A case Study of the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria. Ibadan, Nigeria: Hope Publications
- Oyewumi, O. (1997) A Critical Analysis of Oyeronke Oyewumi's The Intervention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shugart, Helen A. 1994 'The Missing Text: Rape and Women's Sexuality.' *Women and Language* XVII(I): 12-19
- Ubrurhe J.O. (1999) 'Culture Religion and Feminism: Hermeneutics Problem' in Ifie, E. (Ed.) *Coping with culture*, Ibadan: Oputuru Books
- Williams, C.O. (2019) Patriarchy and the representation of Women in Africa and Asia International Institute for Asian Culture, Newsletter 83 Retrieved from <https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/patriarchy-and-representation-women-africa-and-asia>. Accessed 08 September, 2021.