

## GENDER ISSUES IN AFRICAN CULTURE: AN EVALUATION

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### **Abstract**

*Gender deals with the assigning of certain roles to a particular sex by the society. In some cultures, however, gender roles are permeated with religious undertones and up scaled to divine mandate in order to give them legitimacy and ensure they are adhered to. In this regard, African culture is not in isolation hence it is assumed that culture and religion is the most defining factors in gender issues. Based on the foregoing, this work is set to spotlight on gender in African culture, that is to say having an intrinsic understanding of how the Africans perceive gender and its roles in the African cultural setting. This work adopts a phenomenological method in its study and will be framed with Structural Functionalism theory. The paper observes that there are roles performed by the genders which are assigned to them by the culture. It concludes that gender roles are social constructs which go in synergy with the cultural norms of a particular society. The paper therefore recommends that in as much as the African culture apportions roles to sexes within the pre-colonial era which has helped in orchestrating inequality in the society, it will not be out of place in this present modernized society, if those roles can be readjusted in order to give way to equality and equilibrium in the society.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Gender role, Issues, African culture.

### **Introduction**

The issue of Gender and its discussion has occupied a space in the present day scholarship. This is because some scholars are arguing on the distinction made by the roles performed by the sexes within the society of which is credence to culture and religion. It will be germane here to posit that culture and religion

remain sources of gender inequality and oppression for most women in Africa. In the words of Jenks in Rwafa (2016), culture refers to the “learned and ideational aspects of human society”. 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. On the other hand, religion on its own is a concept that has defiled a consensus and agreed definition because of scholars’ perceptions base on their variegated backgrounds, but in the opinion of Rwafa, it is referred to as what people believe in; their spirituality and how this shapes their relation with each other and with God. Gender as societal assigned roles to men and women are perceived to be “fixed”, “unchangeable” and “incontestable”. Gender, culture and religion are terminologies that are without problems in their usage in some African communities to justify the oppression of women and patriarchal nature of the society, hence the discussion on ‘Gender in African Culture’.

### **Theoretical framework**

This work adopts the theory of functionalism. This theory is a framework for building theory that sees the society as complex system whose part work together to promote solidarity and stability. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (Macionis, 2011). Furthermore, structural functionalism is a sociological theory that originally attempted to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual biological needs. Later, it came to focus on the ways social institutions meet social needs. The proponent scholars of this theory are Emile Durkheim, August Comte, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parson. In the opinion of DeRosso (2003), structural functionalism looks at society through a macro level orientation by focusing on the social structures and institutions that make up the society, noting their respective and peculiar roles that shape the society. More so, the thrust of functionalism theory is that the society consists of several institutions performing specific functions for overall growth of the society. In the opinion of Hoult (1969), the central concern of structural functionalism is a continuation of the Durkheimian task of explaining the stability and internal cohesion of societies that are necessary to ensure their continued existence overtime. Many functionalists argue that social institutions are functionally integrated to form a stable system and that a change in one institution will precipitate a change in other institution. It is in this regards that societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms with their various parts working together to maintain and reproduce them. Hoult goes

further to posit that the various parts of society are assumed to work in unconscious, quasi- automatic fashion towards the maintenance of the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this state and are effectively deemed to have a life of their own. These components are then primarily analyzed in terms of the function they play. In other words, to understand a component of society, one can ask the question of the function of the institution. Hence, a function in this regards is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part.

This works adopts this theory because it views the family as the most integral component of the society and assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in its perspective. Going further in this direction, Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of the domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing and unable to leave the home for long periods of time. Once established, these roles were passed on to subsequent generations since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly.

### **Understanding Gender and Gender roles**

**Gender:** In the opinions of March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay (1999) gender is referred to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in families, societies and cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender roles and expectations are learned, they can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more, modify gender roles. The concept of gender is vital because, applied to social analysis; it reveals how women's subordination or men's domination is socially constructed (Kanu 2011). As such, the subordination can be changed or ended because it is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.

According to WHO (2017), gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex (i.e. the state of being male, female, or an intersex variation), sex-based social structures (i.e. gender roles), or gender identity. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles of and relationships between men and women. Gender concerns men and women, including conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. The difference between 'gender' and 'sex' is that the latter refers only to biological differences while the former refers to social differences. Ogbuagu in Ogbuagu and Akpuru (2005) (ed.) explains that gender is socially constructed for the purpose of allocating power, duties, responsibilities, statuses and roles in any given social milieu or context. It is universally conceptualized either as an organizing concept which can be inoffensively interpreted as neutral (that is without bias) or as a value laden concept which is applied to impose discriminatory practices against one group by another within a given setting. Gender does not mean focusing solely on women or females, but rather on the **inequalities** between male and female, and should not be confused with feminism or women's studies (Kanu 2012).

Analyses of gender differences often show a disadvantaged and **weaker position of women and girls** in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical issues. This is why there is a tendency for gender discussions and interventions to focus on correcting these imbalances by specifically targeting on women and girls.

**Gender role:** Levesque (2011) sees gender role as a social role encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for people based on their actual or perceived sex. It is usually centered on conceptions of masculinity and femininity, although there are exceptions and variations. The specifics regarding these gendered expectations may vary substantially among cultures, while other characteristics may be common throughout a range of cultures. There is ongoing debate as to what extent gender roles and their variations are biologically determined and to what extent they are socially constructed. Various groups, most notably the masculist and feminist movements, have led efforts to change aspects of prevailing gender roles that they believe are oppressive or inaccurate.

The term gender role according to Janssen (2018) was first used by John Money and colleagues in 1954, during the course of his study of intersex individuals to describe the manners in which these individuals expressed their status as a male

or female in a situation where no clear biological assignment existed. The World Health Organization (2017) defines gender roles as ‘socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women’. Debate continues as to what extent gender and gender roles are socially constructed (i.e. non-biologically influenced), and to what extent ‘socially constructed’ may be considered synonymous with ‘arbitrary’ or ‘malleable’. Therefore, a concise authoritative definition of gender roles or gender itself is elusive (Francis, 2000).

Genders roles are culturally specific and while most cultures distinguish only two (boy and girl or man and woman), others recognize more. Roscoe (2000) asserts that Androgyny has been proposed as a third gender. Androgynous is simply a person with qualities pertaining to both the male and female gender. Other societies have claimed to identify more than five genders and some non-Western societies have three genders – man, woman and third (Sykes, 2006). It will be necessary to opine here that gender role which refers to the cultural expectations as understood by gender classification is not the same thing as gender identity, which refers to the internal sense of one's own gender, whether or not it aligns with categories offered by societal norms. The point at which these internalized gender identities become externalized into a set of expectations is the genesis of a gender role. While gender on itself is a range of characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity, hence gender as a concept is focused on the inequality between male and female in the society and not female alone, Gender roles are the activities, responsibilities and rights that a society considers normal and appropriate for men and women (Acker,1992).

### **Gender in Africa Culture**

Gender/Gender role is a way of appearing and behaving that meets cultural expectations based on an individual's gender. Traditionally, people have been expected to fit into either a male or female gender role and there is no single model of gender roles in Africa. The continent's diverse cultures have many different ideas about male and female roles, although in general women have been subordinate to men in both public and family lives. Gender functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meanings given to being male or female. This is evident in the division of labour according to gender. In

most African societies, there are clear patterns of women's work and men's work both in the household and in the wider community and cultural explanations of why this should be so. The patterns and the explanations differ among societies and change over time. For Ngubane (2010), gender in African culture is defined according to roles and functions in the society. It is what it means to be male or female in a certain society that shapes the opportunities one is offered in life, the roles one may play, and the relationships one may have. Gender functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meanings given to being male or female. Expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and about the relations between women and men in other words, gender are shaped by culture. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, in the wider community and in the workplace (Schalkwyk, 2000). In the Africa society, gender role can be discussed under pre and post-colonial eras. In pre-colonial African society, women generally played the critical roles as agents of propagation of its genetic stock, preservation of its culture, cohesion of society and economic growth; through birthing and nurturing of babies, upbringing of children, exertion of collective moral coercive force for the common good, and partaking in socio-economic endeavors (Okrah, 2018). Before the advent of colonial rule in Africa, African queens sometimes wielded political power which exceeded that of actual sovereigns. Famous queens and queen mothers, such as Nandi of the Zulu, and the queens of Egypt, which are also well documented (Aspern, 1998).

Shwartz-Bart (2001in Okrah 2018), praises and summarizes about African women rulers, warriors, and heroines which includes Amanirenas, the queen of Kush who battled Roman armies and defeated them at Aswan; Daurama, mother of the seven Hausa kingdoms; Amina Kulibali, founder of the Gabu dynasty in Senegal; Ana de Sousa Nzinga, who resisted the Portuguese conquest of Angola; Beatrice Kimpa Vita, a Kongo prophet burned at the stake by Christian missionaries; Nanda, mother of the famous warrior-king Shaka Zulu; and many others. In most cases the Queen Mother was older than the King and was biologically related to him. She often had her own land, from which she gained revenue through tax and her word was law of the land she owned. She had her own courts complete with courtiers and staff. It is only through her courts that decrees, especially death sentences, made by the King could be annulled. Although the King had the technical power of the lives of those in his kingdom, the Queen Mother could often give someone back their life. According to Uwa in Okrah (2018), in traditional Africa, women had recognized the vital roles in the

economic wellbeing of their communities. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, women were the major food producers and thus not only had ready access to land but also had authority of how the land was to be used and cultivated. Therefore, the value of women's productive labour in producing and processing food established and maintained their rights in the domestic and other spheres. Nowadays, women still are major food producers either directly or through employment, they do not receive the recognition and respect that they used to. Colonialism profoundly negatively affected the role and status of women in African society. Uwa (2008) continues the discourse with the revelation that, in much of pre-colonial Africa, bride wealth gave women a certain amount of economic independence and clout. In the past, African women in some societies retained a measure of control over their bride wealth, which economically empowered her to a certain extent. Sadly, with the new financial constraints experienced by males due to colonialism, especially in the form of heavy taxation, bride wealth became a source of income that males sought to control. According to UNESCO (1963), it is generally true that in African societies, women are in terms of tribal law perpetual minors, they are always under the guardianship of the men, definitely inferior to that of men. She is treated as a minor "before and after marriage and must always be under the guardianship of her father before marriage and her husband after marriage.

According to Tydskr (2015), in the traditional African imaginary, women are expected to be quiet when men speak, respectable by being respectful to men (especially to male leadership), good mothers of the nation and not to challenge authority in general. African women politicians are expected to be quiet and not challenge authority. In Maathai (2007), a proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined within the context of the family. She is expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be the end goal for most African women. A proper woman puts the family interest first before even her own personal interest. An African woman is not concerned about trees and the environment; rather she is supposed to be concerned about her family and children. If she were to be concerned about trees, it would be in terms of firewood which she needs to provide fuel for her kitchen.

Furthermore, Maathai opines that the idea that proper African women should not speak up therefore was not only a creation of colonialism, it had also been institutionalized within the masculinist state by virtue of their patriarchal inheritance from African traditions. The silencing of oppositional views is equivalent to the ordering that patriarchal societies have done to women. Hence

a proper African woman is imagined to exist within an ideal African family composed of a real loving husband or father who is usually the head of household, a supporting wife or mother who is expected to mother the children of the household. A proper African woman therefore aspires to be a wife and a mother and does not divorce or if she divorces, she does not stand for a position of leadership because she knows that she will be seen to be a bad example. In the African culture, women are not supposed to be too educated; in fact the question of education sometimes brought division between elite and grassroots women's organizations (Tydsk, 2015; Kanu 2015).

By contrast, an African man according to popular belief is often considered to be that man who rules over his family with a firm hand. He is the breadwinner; he provides for the household; he defends the honour of his family. An African man is therefore considered to be the ideal father and husband, a man who nurtures his children according to the rules of the patriarchal family. It is this metaphor of the family that is projected onto the political leaders when they are viewed as fathers of the nation. In Schatzberg (2001), political metaphors in Africa provide some useful insights into how the gendered images of fatherhood and motherhood have been constructed and operationalized in Africa. He also shows how these perceptions are translated into political practice. The head of state is likened to a father because fatherhood is viewed as the most appropriate imagery that reflects authority. Schatzberg furthers by saying that virtually all heads of states in middle Africa have wanted the press to view them as kind, loving, solicitous individuals who were fathers of the nation. The father of the nation is expected to be the moral authority in the country just like a father is the head of household in his own nuclear family. The father of the nation is expected to take care of his children, namely the citizens, nurture and provide paternal care for them. Thus the father of the nation is expected to provide for and feed the national family (Schatzberg, 2001).

Speaking on the Anatomy of female power, Chinweizu (1990) opines that the women have the power of the kitchen which is always passed on to the daughters to make sure that such power is not taken away from them. The male child is always allowed to be with the father while the female ones are to be with the mother in the kitchen to learn how to cook. This in his assertion posits that the African culture designates the kitchen and cooking to women while the men are to be served. This lays credence to the general assertion in some localities of people addressing a man that cooks as woman because he does the work of the women. Also in the part of the world we came from which is also in African

culture, the boys are always sent to cut grasses (food) for goat or sheep and also have the responsibility of cutting firewood and pounding fufu, while the women have the cooking. These roles are ascribed based on the cultural perception that the men are strong while the women are weak and it should be reflected on the roles they perform.

More so, the earliest economics in Africa was based on hunting and gathering wild foods, few societies survived almost completely unchanged into modern times. Through them, scientists have been able to study the ancient hunting and gathering way of life. Early theories about biological and social development in humans stressed the importance of meat eating and of men's roles as hunters. Today however, researchers know that women were the primary economic producers in many early societies. Throughout most African cultures today, their role in farming differs from one culture to the other. The African perception on gender can be viewed and illustrated by the way a particular tools or implement is associated with gender. For instance, the axe is considered a man's tool because men clear and prepare the land and also plow the field. The hoe is exclusively reserved for women who plant, process and store the crops. In some cultures, men are known for cultivating a particular crop while the women face a particular crop. For instance, in the Igbo cultural setting, men are known for cultivating yam while women are to cultivate other crops like corn, melon, vegetables, cassava and others. Social and economic policies of most African nations do favour men more than the women hence women are lagging behind men in education, literacy and access to good jobs. This is why in most African cities; women generally make a living by trading or domestic servants rather than as salaried employees. In some West Africa, women dominate trading in local market than the men. Among the Hausas, married women are required by religious law to stay inside their homes while few of them manage to run business but using their children to carry messages and good.

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### **Conclusion**

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the meaning and context of gender has been in contest. No generalizations about gender are applicable through time or across space. Even where gender roles are defined by particular cultural norms, they are not static and an individual may pass through several gendered social transformations in a lifetime. Gender roles can be identified in some archaeological sites in parts of Africa and these roles sometimes appear to have altered through time. Gender roles change with environmental shifts, and certain tasks or roles also disappear

as a result. In other cases, gender roles were revised because of social pressures imposed on specific communities. A view at African culture will see that the Africans have social roles attached to the sexes which help to guide and regulate their actions in line with the acceptable norms of that particular sex.

### **Recommendations**

Having gone through this research, it is pertinent for this paper to make the following recommendations, viz

That in as much as the African culture apportions roles to sexes within the pre-colonial era which has helped in orchestrating inequality in the society, it will not be out of place in this present modernized society, if those roles can be readjusted in order to give way to equality and equilibrium in the society.

The paper also observes that a restriction of a particular sex in some activities within the society has drastically affected growth in those societies and recommends that there should be freedom for every person within a particular age level to participate in communal gathering in order to give room for wider representation and various opinions on issues. The paper further observes that in some African cultures, women are not allowed to be part in some businesses and jobs which has negatively affected the economic flourishing and therefore recommends that there should be freedom to both men and women to pursue business of their interest with the view of a sprouting and flourishing economy.

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