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THE PARADOX OF POWER AND "SUBMISSION" OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Although it is true that in most African societies, male supremacy is taken for granted (just as in most societies in the world) it would be wrong to see the traditional African woman as a mere passive object in the practice of her religion. A spate of literature now exists on her role as either a priest, prophet, diviner etc. in the traditional religion.¹ One significant observation in most of the literature is that the writers do not attribute the freedom and independence which many African women enjoy, entirely to western influences. They therefore indirectly ascribe the freedom ontologically to the nature of African society. However the overt manifestation of some aspects of this freedom and 'power' has been submerged in several ways by a number of factors. That women have "inherent mystical powers" in the belief and practice of African Traditional Religion and in society in general, is yet to be realised and understood by those still plagued by the bogey of 'male domination'.

I

This paper will attempt to analyse the subtle ways in which this 'unrealized power' of women is manifested in African traditional religion and society to validate the claims that African women are generally the "powers" behind the "mask". Instead of describing the positive roles of

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1. Sylvia Leith-Ross: *African Women: A study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London; Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1939) Reissued 1965.
M.J. Herskovits "A Note of "Women" marriage in Dohomey" *African Notes*, 10, (1937) 335-341 Jack Harris, *The position of Women in a Nigeria Society* (New York Academy of Sciences) series 11 Vol. 2, No. 5, 1940. Marian Kilsen, "The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion" *JRA* VIII, 3 (1976) 133ff. C. Setzman, *Women in Antiquity* (London; Thames and Hudson, 1956).
D. Amaury Talbot, *Women's Mysteries of a primitive people: The Ibibios of Southern Nigeria* (London: Cassel, 1915).

women – (much has been done along this line – we shall analyse how man has indirectly discovered this ‘power’ in woman and has consciously or unconsciously devised means to curb it. Thus every attempt of man to subject woman under him is an indirect way of accepting and recognizing that “mysterious power” in her which he is afraid of. We shall validate our view points with evidences collected from some ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Many scholars especially Europeans have written a lot about the suppression of African women as mere chattels. Yet in the traditional and undislocated African communities, women had their definite place and roles either as mothers, wives, daughters. The issue is not that of superiority or inferiority vis-a-vis their male counterparts. Mrs. F. A. Ogunsheye writing in the 1960s about women in Nigeria in traditional society had stated that “there were sanctions and means of getting redress for cruelty when woman felt hurt”.² This included open riot and demonstrations against the male members of the society. Often aggrieved women in a society could organize a mass exodus from their matrimonial homes in self exile to another distant or neighbouring town and take refuge in the home of the Chief of the town. While there, peaceful negotiations would be going on between their host town and their husbands. Not until concrete terms of agreement were reached and sealed, the women would not return to their matrimonial homes.

Such occasions brought untold hardship to the husbands of the women and their families. Most homes become deserted and abandoned because mothers who are virtually the “breadwinners” of their nuclear families leave the children to the care of their husbands who under normal conditions do not know much about the day to day welfare of the children. Usually, most African women are directly responsible for the maintenance of their children.

African women have got numerous outlets for self-expression both in their religious and political lives in the society. The Aba riot organized by the Igbo women of Nigeria in 1929 aroused a lot of interest and anxiety in the country. Consequently it gave rise to a number of colonial

2. F. A. Ogunsheye “The Women in Nigeria” *Presence Africaine* No. 4–5 (1960) p. 33cf. Dennise Pauline (Ed) *Women in Tropical African* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1963).

government sponsored anthropological studies of the Igbo especially of the women. That was the era of the so-called Intelligence Reports on several communities in the colonial districts. It was there and then that the colonial administration realized how little their knowledge of the people was. The Riot, known as "Women's War" was a protest by women against the rumours that they were to be taxed. This was worsened by the economic depression that followed soon after the First World War and the consequent fall in the price of palm produce which was the mainstay of the economy then. Many have argued that the riot was an evidence of the fact that first, women were organised and were a force to reckon with in the society as the riot spread as far as Calabar in the far eastern part of the country and secondly, that they (the women) were not docile as some authorities had thought.³ This riot became the main theme of Sylvia Loith-Ross's ethnographic survey published in 1939.⁴

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, for instance, there had been several cases of many prominent achievements of women in their history. Two women had ruled as the Onis (Kings) of the Holy City of Ife. The Yoruba believe that Ife is the cradle of the World's civilization. The Oni is the highest office a human being could hold in Yorubaland. One of the Ewis of Ado-Ekiti (another prominent traditional ruler) was sometime a woman. So women had in the distant past held the highest office of Kingship in the traditional society. They could therefore no longer be ignored as passive members of the society. Besides, the prominent role Madam Tinubu, the woman chief of Abeokuta who commanded a regiment of soldiers during the attack of King Gelele of Dahomey on Abeokuta in 1864, has ever remained fresh in the annals of Yoruba history.⁵ Her effort brought victory to her people.

In many African societies, women have not seriously claimed that the political affairs of their country should be their major business. Consequently, they are satisfied with mere participation as ordinary citizens. Even in modern times, many women look apolitical except when challenged by some societal pressures. Yet they have organized themselves sufficiently to see to it that their position towards the men, rights and privileges are safeguarded.

3. Cf. F. A. Ogunsheye, *Ibid.*, 37.

4. Sylvia, Leith Ross *Ibid.*

5. H. U. Beir "The Position of Yoruba Women" *Presence African* 1-2 (1955) p. 39.

Among the Igbo, for instance, the political role of *Umuada* (Umuokpu) – daughters of the community – is powerful within their traditional maiden homes.⁶ They play an important role through their leaders in recommendation of abolition or modification of customs, taboos, nature and performance of festivals, rituals and observances pertaining to women to the governing authorities in the community. The abolition or modification of any custom, taboo, festival or ritual whether connected with women or men or both has a religious overtone. Invariably, they influence the religious system of their society. Ostensibly, the *Umuada*, acting through their leaders exercise such 'moral powers' that no one questions within the community. They act as the last court of appeal in the traditional society. They are invited to settle family disputes. Even cases especially, land disputes, that defy the orders of traditional courts of elders or in modern times the Law courts, must submit to the order of the *Umuada* as the final arbiter. The sources of the moral powers' of the *Umuada* is beyond the comprehension of any critical enquirer. To disobey an order by *Umuada* means disobeying the order of the ruling ancestors who are the custodians of the ethos of the society.

II

Most African societies are patrilineal. Yet one is surprised to observe that indirectly attachment of siblings of one mother to one another is far more close than that between those from one father. A mother's influence is strong on her children even if those children are born to different men in different towns.⁷ In polygamous homes, rivalry is rife between half brothers or half sisters. The influence of a father as a rallying point of unity is minimal when compared with that of mother. This is because mothers in polygamous homes act as the real 'heads' of their 'unclear families' and factors of unity between their 'biological' children.

6. F. C. Ogbalu, *Igbo Institutions and Customs* (Onitsha – Nigeria: University publishing Co. N. D.) p. 28.

Cf. Leon Francois Hoppman, "The Image of Women in Haitian Poetry" *Presence African* Vol. 6-7, 187-213.

7. This is possible because women could have children from different men because of either divorce and remarriage or levirate marriage and wife inheritance. No matter where the children live or are born, their mother tries to bring them together to confide in and associate with one another.

Bond of relationship between such children is stronger in most cases than those of children who share a common father.

In Annang Society of the Cross River State of Nigeria, inheritance follows the patrilineal system. Yet, the ethical laws are more strict on the mother's line than on the father's. For instance, one is strictly prohibited from offending a relative on the mother's side. This is explained in terms of the prominent roles mothers play in the formation of an individual's character from cradle to the grave. Any offence committed against a relative on the father's side may be ignored but viewed seriously if committed against a relative on the mother's side.

Among the Igbo if a criminal takes refuge in a grand mother's home, he is eternally protected from harm by his assailants. He is granted an assylum which may be denied him in his own village. No grand child is harmed in his maternal grand parent's home. The spilling of the blood of such a grandchild is a serious act of pollution against the Earth goddess. The emphasis on the mother's line in this case is an indirect way of acknowledging the 'power' of a mother in the traditional faith. Her influence on every aspect of the people's life is immense. One is usually attracted to ones maternal home and kinsmen much more than one is attracted to a father's kinsman;⁸ yet outwardly the father's kinsmen are a man's closest neighbours.

III

Men have indirectly and unconsciously realised this "mystical power" in women. They are therefore afraid of women but pretentiously put up a show of strength to cover up. Most taboos and restrictions devised by men in the distant past against women were primarily contrived to curb the 'powers' of women. That women do not exercise such 'powers' constantly does not mean that they do not possess them. If the women are uncontrolled and unrestricted, they might use their 'inherent powers' to subdue men. For instance, man's fear of shedding blood has made him dread a woman in menstruation. To make her keep away from the public view, man declares such a woman "impure" during the period - because blood is the essence of life.⁹ To lose the essence of life means death. A

8. Edmund C. Ilogu, *Igbo Life and Thought* (Onitsha Nigeria: University publishing Co. Ltd. 1985) p. 29.

9. See Ogbu U. Kalu "Precarious Vision: The African's Perception of His World" in O. U. Kalu (ed) *African Cultural Development* (Enugu Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978) p. 41.

CF. Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women" in J. Lafontaine (ed) *The Interpretation of Ritual* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).

human being in that state is a bearer of 'death' at the point in time and therefore should be dreaded and avoided. To declare such object as 'impure' is an indirect way of putting her under subjection.

The same attempt at subduing the 'power' in women may be seen in the differences between the ages of a man and his wife. Even in modern times, men do not like to marry women who belong to the same age group with them. Consequently one can see a man of fifty having a twenty year old lady as his third wife. The reason for this, is to make sure that the woman does not challenge the man's authority in a society that is gerontocratic, P.A. Talbot has described a form of marriage among the Igbo and Kalabari of southern Nigeria which is still in existence and a manifestation of authority among some powerful and popular women. A wealthy woman who is childless sometimes "marries" a wife for herself whom she can give to her husband or to any man within the lineage to raise children who will become her husband's offspring.¹⁰

It is pertinent here also to discuss the accusation of old and helpless women as agents of witchcraft in relation to the fear man has of the suspected 'power' of such women. The accusation is a mechanism devised to curb such "powers". It is suspected that such elderly women could use their "hidden powers" to harm people and the most effective way to curb their use of such powers could be to accuse them of any misfortune that befalls the society. Hence women are the greatest suspects of the evils of witchcraft. The male role is to combat it and keep women in subjection.¹¹ In other words the accusation of women as workers of evil through witchcraft is man's clever way of bringing the 'powers of women' into subjection. Few men are accused of participation in this anti-social practice but most victims are women.

Man has discovered the "power" of women as the fertility principle, bearer of life and life essence. It is therefore a taboo to pluck out this

10. P. A. Talbot *Peoples of Southern Nigeria Vol. III* (London: O.U.P. 1931) 431, 439, 441. Cf. M. J. Herskovits *Ibid* p. 336.

11 E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, Third edition, 1974) p. 131. See Lucy Mair, *Witchcraft* (World University Library, 1969). John Middleton and E. Winter (eds) *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962).

Mary Douglas (ed) *Witchcraft Confession and Accusation* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970) pp. 131-140.

very object through whom life is 'created'. Hence women are treated as non-belligerents in every war. No one fires a shot at a woman as that would tantamount to cutting off the "source of life".

Another device through which man has tried to bring down the 'power of women' is the practice of polygamy. This form of marriage, no matter how one defends it, reduces the status of women and curbs their "excessive powers". Although there may be many socio-economic reasons for men to go in for polygamy, there are other subtle reasons unknown to most people. On enquiry, we discovered that men believe that when a man has cleverly brought many women under him as a husband, he is not likely going to succumb to the whims and caprices of the power of any of them. A monogamist is likely to be held to ransom by his lone wife, who could starve him and make him work under the spell of her influence. Wives in polygamous homes would rather struggle to 'serve' to win the favour of their husband. Thus they unconsciously, lose their 'inherent' power and could no longer assert their authority.

Finally it has been discovered that in some societies, at the burial of a man, his corpse is received by his mother who stands inside the grave as he is being lowered. This last ritual is a reminiscence of the fact that a man is brought into the world by a mother who must at the end of his life, take him out also. Mothers are therefore given the opportunity to receive the corpses of their children just in the same way they brought them into the world. This ritual shows the mother as the last recipient of her child's body just as the 'mother earth' receives it as its last place of rest. Women's 'power', though often subdued and submerged, has manifested itself in all spheres of human life.

Conclusion

We have tried in this essay to show how women's powers are manifested in human society. In addition, we have argued that most taboos, and prohibitions against women were devised in the early days of human society to check women from exercising to the full the innate force in them. That notwithstanding, the women occasionally make use of several outlets to manifest the powers when the need arises.

In African traditional religion and society, women have manifested their powers as medicinemen, prophets, priests, soothsayers, mediums,

diviners and other religious personnels. They have also served as chiefs and kings and have been deified as ancestral spirits as well as being "canonized" as ancestors. Under the spell of a woman's influence, man has been made to succumb to what ordinarily he could not have. That most women have chosen to serve unobstructively as observers and spectators in some cases, does not mean that they are 'handicapped' and cannot exercise their right and power. Hitherto, they are a force to reckon with and it would be the height of folly for any leader to ignore the "unseen power of women". Although they have the power, they may be content to serve as "the prompter" behind the screen. Their relationship with their male counterparts could be described as that between "Power" and "Glory". Women are the 'Power' behind the action of men who claim the 'Glory' of the victory. The women's contentment with their place in the society does not make them 'inferior' but should be seen in terms of their realization of their "call" as partners in progress with men. African women are in most cases ignored and taken for granted but they are ultimately an indispensable force in the society. They do not strike often but whenever they strike, the impact is tremendous.