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An African Argument from the compendium of Yorùbá Ancient Wisdom against Gender Inequality

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“An African Argument from the compendium of Yorùbá Ancient Wisdom against Gender Inequality”

Abstract:
This paper deals with gender issues in African culture. Many scholars working on African indigenous and non-indigenous cultures have had something to say about the treatment of the women folk and the topic of gender inequality in Africa (see for instance, Olokessu, 2011:2; Churu, 2008:8; Steady, 1981:7-41; Evan-Pritchard, 1965: 76-101). While Y. A. Blay contends that "any train of thought that interrogates the condition and/or position of women, be it social, economic, political or the like, is an import of the West and therefore inapplicable in the global African context”, the paper shows that African traditional practices often paraded as African cultures are sometimes hindrances to gender equality and emancipation of women folk, other scholars, such as Bahru Zewde (2002:7-16), have suggested that the roots of female oppression are to be sought in customs and traditions, in spite of a legal system that guarantees women rights in Africa.

The main objective of this paper however is to advance an argument for the re-examination of the widespread belief that treatment of women as a second class or inferior gender is indigenous to Africa, and that liberty and equality, which are the most crucial factors in ensuring social order, are necessarily not gender neutral in African indigenous cultures.
Cyril-Mary P. OLATUNJI

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The 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries have witnessed the most consistent global effort to end inequalities and discrimination on the basis of differences such as sex, ethnic origin, economic status, etc. Thus, human rights activists and oppressed groups have placed these issues on the front-page of media coverage and feminist studies have identified discriminative patterns based on gender differences and advanced theoretical models for amelioration of the inequalities. In the United States, the decade of the 1980s, saw the publication of the "This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color" (Moraga, et al. 1981) which inaugurated a decade of social struggle in which activists and scholars from many diverse disciplines and backgrounds united in their vindication against the racist articulation of gender within mainstream feminisms. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa challenged traditional gender theories and mapped their own politics of discrimination on the basis of categories of race and class, as well as feminist differences. Intersectional approaches (see Berger and Guidroz 2009) have shown how sociological, anthropological and economic aspects such as race, socio-economic status, demographic distribution of population, and many other factors, intersect in the problem of gender inequality and discrimination. Despite the continuous struggle and recent international conference such as the Beijing 1995 and the New York summit in March 2005, numerous voices from Africa still lament domestic violence, widespread poverty and various forms of discrimination (Mutume, 2005, 6). Very few African women have occupied positions of power that would have contributed to improve the situation. The only woman president in Africa was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia (Women in Power, 2000). Equal representation of women in a government cabinet could only be found in very few places, such as the Republic of South Africa (Mbola, 2009, np) and perhaps only in very recent time in Nigeria where some of the most coveted portfolios of the minister of Finance (Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (2012, 21)) and the minister of Petroleum (Diezani Alison-Madueke) are held by women (The Nation:2011:11, National Mirror,2011, 14). The minister of communication and Technology (Mrs. Omobola Johnson) and the minister of women affairs (Hajia Zainab Maina) are also women (The Nation, 2012, 2). J. Biegon & M. Killander state that only two women sat as judges of the African Court of the African Union prior to 2009 (Biegon & Killander 2009, 295-311) This underrepresentation is an indication of gender inequality (Schoepf, 1992, 203-241). Although isolated examples of female Pharaohs in Egypt, Queen Amina of Zaria and Queen Idia of the Benin kingdom come to mind. The few identifiable examples are insufficient reasons to infer that there is anything near gender equality or fair representation of women or female gender in Africa, or that women representation in social and political sphere is a widespread practice in Africa (Skaine, 2008), history is also replete with stories of cases of women abuse in Africa, both by kings and by peasants who tenaciously invoke the spirit of tradition to justify their cruelty. Gender discrimination in Africa, like elsewhere, is mostly about socio-cultural factors resulting from a highly patriarchal socio-economic system. This includes ethnic discrimination as well failing to provide equality in the legal system, in education, in public political and non-political institutions and places of representation (the media for instance), employment, etc. (see Adeleye-Fayemi 2007, 1-6) When it comes to indigenous populations “silence on women’s subordinated status to men and their sexually determined roles is even more remarkable when one considers African philosophers’ predilection to extract from the systematic and critical analyses of proverbs, myths, customs, beliefs and practices...from their literatures, there is no evidence that they have adequately thought about the discrepancy of a communitarian ethos and women’s inferior non-egalitarian status and general lack of rights.” (van den Berg 1999, 193-212)
Several models of solution have been suggested, while some call for psychological and economic empowerment of women, others opine that there would be the need to demilitarize masculinity first, either through affirmative action or through the suppression of the culture that promotes masculinity (Women in Nigeria Document- WIN, 1992).

Women and children are most vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence everywhere in the world, and not just in Africa. But dramatic cases where women are sentenced to death on the basis of adultery or pregnancy outside of marriage, while the men named in the cases were acquitted for lack of evidence (Akinseye-George, 2009:97) have captured the interest of international civil rights movements. It is not enough to say that the position of women in African society requires significant adjustments, the negotiation of conflicting understandings in order to set in motion new regulations regarding the issue of women and gender inequality in Africa is also important (see Hapkin & Bay, 1987, 1-18)

There are usually two schools of thought regarding the treatment of women in Africa. One includes afro-cultural critics (Uchem, 2001, 2-10) who maintain that women are treated like second-class citizens in Africa (Jule-Rosette, 2002, 603-605, Okumo, 2001, Bryceson, 2000, 417-442). Some scholars have pointed out that scholars from outside Africa do not really understand the particular situations despite their campaigns for women-empowerment (Connah, 1987, 2). The second group of afro-cultural apologists holds that what is regarded as injustice by the first group lies at the core of African culture, so that women’s subordination is indigenous to African social morality (Dzurgba, 2007, 134-142, Mailu, 1988, 118-123). They argue that these inequalities are positive discrimination and benefit women. Thus, while Chinua Achebe criticizes the handling of women in traditional Africa when in The Anthills of the Savannah he says: “the idea came to man to turn his spouse into the very mother of god. To pick her up from right under his foot... and carry her reverently to a new corner pedestal. Up there her feet completely off the ground she will be just as irrelevant to the practical decision of running the world as she was in her bad old days” (1988.89). It is argued that “Yoruba women are expected to ensure the success of their marriages through submission to their husbands even if their husbands beat them...this is what culture...demands from them.” (as used in Aluko, 2006, 19-23)

Whatever the case, however, there seems to be a general agreement that the economic, intellectual, social and political status of women in contemporary Africa requires drastic improvement. However, it would be unjust to accuse African indigenous cultures of maintaining gender discrimination. Culture is not static and represents the social mechanisms for dealing with particular situations in a given society. Over time, the repetitions of such mechanisms become embedded in values and traditions, represented in rituals. The transformation of these social conventions is a slow process that requires negotiation and consensus, and takes place at various times in the different social groups.

Is this conception and treatment of women indigenous to Africa? Has it been the original pre-colonial position or because people have abused the original culture? Must a custom be preserved simply because it is indigenous and has been part of tradition? Should it be abandoned because it is alien to the surrounding customs? By what criteria should Africans select what they retain or eliminate or dispose of their tradition? Are cultures consciously selected like a political constitution? Are traditions fixed or changing? If there is no one way of thinking, can there be a one fixed way of doing things? These are some of the questions that easily come to mind in any analysis of the relationship between Africa and their customs. Without necessarily trying to suggest answers to any or all of the above questions, this paper argues that even if we must accept that there are customs that are indigenous to the people of Africa, it is only by way of sweeping generalization and uncritical assumption for anyone to conclude that treating women as secondly class or inferior is indigenous to
Africa or that African cultures and customs are responsible for gender discrimination and gender inequality in Africa.

By looking back at primitive traditions, this paper might signal a historical basis for potentially discriminative situations in contemporary societies. This is not, however, the sole intention of the author. The study demonstrates the extent of the complexity of the problem. Let us look at a few examples.

In a number of other traditional practices throughout Africa, women are kept from witnessing certain aspects of secret practices and rituals. A traditional argument is that like children, women require special care and protection. It could, perhaps, also be said that African men are considerate in treating women as delicate and fragile and tender, and protect them from certain harmful practices. A common saying for instance among Yoruba people of West Africa is *awo egungun l'obirin le se, awo gelede l'obirin le se, b'obirin f'aju d'oro oro a gbe* meaning women could participate in the cult of masks and she could participate in the cult of *gelede* dance, but she dare not participate in *oro* (the peak of clandestine practices) However, such clandestine practices reserved for men can also be seen as opposed to the democratic spirit and alien to the human and social development of today's social communities. Widowhood as it is practiced in parts of Africa is a horrible indication that there is more to the treatment and status of women in Africa than merely “protecting them.’ Although this paper does not seriously consider using sociological methods of investigation, at the same time personal experiences may not altogether be out of place, especially because many facts about Africa have not been committed and captured in the literatures.

Only as late as 1988 Malui (1988) struggled to disabuse the minds of presumably Afro-critics regarding the thorny issue of polygamy. In his literature "Our Kind of Polygamy", Malui, using examples drawn from different parts of Africa, though with more attention on the cultures of the Eastern and Southern Africa, distinguishes between polygamy in Africa and polygamy in the Western world. Malui identifies two forms of polygamy as Consecutive and simultaneous polygamy. In his analysis, Malui polarises sharply between African and the Western culture. Although, the simultaneous type of polygamy in which a man has more than one wife at the same time without disowning any is very common in many parts of Africa, none of the two types of polygamy is alien to some African cultures, and none of the two is necessarily and African culture, if at all it is possible to talk of an African culture in a manner that portrays Africa as a single culture. While scholars of the Afro-optimist bent like Malui chresten and defend certain practices as indigenously African, Afro-critic employ a blanket generalisation to demonise the same practices in question. Even in contemporary era, it is not uncommon to find scholarly material where a near slavery marriage system of selling the girl child into marriage is accorded the status of culture with reference to Africa (Parker, 1995).

Adegbehood is one of the traditional practices in Africa that perhaps could appear strange to an average Westerner or Asian. Adegbehood is a system practiced in Isua-Akoko, a boundary town between Ondo and Edo state towards the North Eastern boundary of Ondo state. In the practice, any family where there is no male child, one of the female childrens is chosen and dedicated to the family to take the position of a male in other to be in a position to perform the duties, functions and rites that ordinarily should have been performed by a son within the family, though such duties are not extended beyond the sphere of the family. The etymology of the concept is difficult to explain with certainty. There are divergent opinion on the issue. In two separate interviews if some literate elders of the community, some believe that it is a combination of two concept with different origins, others see it as emerging from a modern coinage of a phrase describing the context. The former see it “adegbe” as a combination of “Adele” a regent in Yoruba language and “gbe signifying prefecion of permanence in Isua dialect.” Put together it means a permanent regent. The
latter group see the concept as describing the fact that the girl child has not been perfectly or permanently purchased in Isua dialect. In Isua dialect “ae” or “ai” is a negation of “a” such as a prefix “not”, “im” or “un” are negations “possible”, “common” and “usual.” In addition “de” means purchase or bought, while “gbe” indicates perfection or permanence. It means altogether that the maiden has not been perfectly purchased. It is not uncommon to find a female child in a male-less family freely offering herself for “adegbhood.” This occasional volition, wherever it occurs, gives the Although the impression that the girl’s freedom of choice is a factor always considered in practice. In practice instead, there have been families where their choice of candidate for adegbhood were influenced by hatred and jealousy. However, whether or not the freedom of the female child if considered, the system of Adegbehood itself is meant to protect the interest of the family rather than for the good of the female child herself. Even though the practice could be indigenous in the sense that the practice had existed in the pre-contact era, the current formulation of the system may have undergone changes and transformations. In fact, such practices also suffer corruption to the extent that when issues and debates arise as a result of the corruption that infiltrate the culture, scholars sometimes, either deliberately or ignorantly defend the culture along with the unnecessary aspects as necessarily indigenous.

This typical attitude is not limited to cultural issues, social and political discourses on Africa tend to follow the same pattern. Based on the arguments of scholars that Africa is a communitarian society, Metz also employs the example of the practice and debates on “Ubuntu” especially in the Southern Africa to support his ambitious project of giving “Ubuntu” a critical theoretical outlook (Metz, 2007, 321-341). Since Africa is said to be necessarily and indigenously communitarian and originally near perfect such that even some defects in the cultures which critics of African culture have identified have been defended not only as good and perfect but also as necessary components of the culture that should under no circumstance be removed or changed, then the origin and solution to the numerous intractable conceptual and social problems of contemporary including the sweeping trend of violence and terrorism presents some epistemological challenges. For instance, in a conference call for abstracts it is claimed that:

One of the difficult challenges facing many African countries today is the problem of negotiating successful transitions from histories tainted variously by colonialism, racial segregation, oppression and conflicts to a truly democratic dispensation. South Africa, Rwanda and Sierra Leone are representative examples of countries on the continent that have attempted to confront violent and fractious histories of Apartheid, Genocide and Civil War respectively through the establishment of reconciliatory processes. The success of these processes are debatable and many of the problems that continue to plague African countries may well be attributed to the failure of post-colonial, post-conflict and multi-ethnic African states, to fully integrate. How new dispensations deal with an oppressive past will have a huge impact on how they consolidate their democratic gains.

While scholars such as Kwasi Wiredu (1996), Moses Akin Makinde (2007, 35-42) and Segun Ogungbemi (2007) argue in different fashions that the problems are as a result of contact with some external or foreign cultures. Ali Mazrui believes that multiple factors have contributed to the problems, Oke argues that the problems originates from within Africa itself (2006, 332-343), Achile Mbembe & Nuttall (2008, 1-33) on the contrary argues that blaming the problems on external factor entirely is an uncritical position. Instead, he insists that the problems originates
from the indigenous cultures. Obembe’s position is akin to the position of this paper that the problems though cannot be blamed on any external influence, but the defects are not necessarily inherent in the cultures but more as a result of a corruption of the cultures. The intractability or the challenges involved in analysing the problems explains the frustration of J. Wilkinson (1996, 162-168) that problems of explanation regarding African Arts(culture) defiles any definite explanation.

That is, how specifically do we account for the origin of the problem, if external forces are held responsible for the problem, how reliably can we depend on any solution which depends on the efficiency of a people for a solution to a problem they would ordinarily have prevented in the first instance.

Particularly too, the widowhood practice still in vogue among the people of Isua-Akoko (also in West Africa) is such that widows are prevented even from common hygiene such as bathing and changing of clothes, hair treatment and social interaction for a period up to nine months, following the death of their spouses. On the contrary, widowers are free to remarry immediately after the death of their partner. The horrible practices are tenaciously held in reverence by the local people as part of their indigenous cultures and heritage that should be preserved. Like their local counterparts, and using the same logic outsiders consider the inhuman practices as widespread practices that are indigenous to African societies and communities, which should be jettisoned to rescue Africans.

The Ifa corpus among Yoruba is one of the compendia of African ancient knowledge and consequently wisdom, religion, morality and culture. It is also regarded by the Yoruba people as the source of wisdom and intellectual development. Ifa is a common practice among Yoruba communities in Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo. It also receives wide spread acceptance in the Diaspora in the Americas and Caribbean countries such as Brazil and Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Cuba to mention just a few. Ifa divination makes use of an extensive corpus of texts and semiotic medium rather than on oracular powers, especially whenever an important individual or collective decision has to be made. If anything is reliably indigenous to Yoruba, it must have its foundation in Ifa corpus (Pogoson & Akande, 2011, p.4; Oke, 2007, 1-19; Abimbola 2006, xviii; Epega, 1987; Abimbola, 1971, 73-89).

One of the Odu (thematic section) of Ifa that is relevant to this discourse is Osa meji. It will be supported by the mythical “consequences of marital neglect by Orunmila.” The poem of Osa meji goes thus:

A difa fun Odu, Obarisa ati Ogun

Nijo ti won nti’kole orun bo w a ile aye

Odu ni: Iwo Olodumare; oni, ile aye l’awon

nlo yii

O ni nighbati awon ba de ohun nko?

Olodumare ni ki won lo maa se ile aye

ki ile aye o dara

O ni gbogbo ohun ti won yio ba si maa

O ni oun o fun won l’ase ti won o maa fi see

Ti yio si fi maa dara

Odu ni: Iwo Olodumare;

We consulted the oracle for Odu, Obarisa and Ogun

On the day that they left heaven for the earth

Odu said: you the Olodumare (Creator), s he said, we are leaving for the earth

What happens when we arrive there?

Olodumare instructed them to make the earth good and orderly

He said that whatever they desire

He has empowered and equipped them

To use the order with which he has empowered them

Odu asked: “O Olodunmare, Lord of Heaven,
ile aye t’awon nlo yii
Ogun l’agbara ogun jija
O ni Obarisa, oun naa l’ase lati ise
gbogbo ohun t’o ba fe se
O ni kini agbara ti oun?
Olodumare ni iwo l’oma je iya won lo lailai

This earth where we are going.
Ogun has the power to wage war.
And Obarisa has the ase to do anything he wishes to do.
What is my own power?
Olodumare said: “you will be their mother forever.
And you will also sustain the world.”
Olodumare, then gave her the power.
And when he gave her power, he gave her
The spirit power of the bird.
It was then that he gave women the
power and authority so that anything men wished to

O ni iwo o o si mu ile aye ro
Olodumare l’o ba fun oun l’agbara
Nigbati o fun oun l’agbara, o fun oun
l’agbara eye
Ni o gbe fun obirin l’ase wipe gbogbo
ohun yio wu,

And Ogun has the power to wage war.
And when he gave her power, he gave her
The spirit power of the bird.
It was then that he gave women the
power and authority so that anything men wished to

Okunrin ko gbodo le da nkankan se
l’ehin obirin.
Odu ni gbogbo ohun ti eniyan ba nse,

They could not dare to do it successfully
Without women.
Odu said that everything that people would want to do,
If they do not include women,
it will not be possible.

O ni ti won ba ti nfi iba fun obirin,
Ile aye yoo maa toro.
E kundle o; e kundle f’obirin, o.
Obinrin l’o bi wa
K’awa to d’eniyan.

Ogbon aye t’obinrin ni
women.
E kundle f’obirin.
Obinrin l’o bi wa
K’awa to d’eniyan.

Before we became recognized as human beings.
The wisdom of the world belongs to
women.
Give respect to women then.
Indeed, it was a woman who brought us into being.
Before we became recognized as human beings.

The poem goes further that:
Ah, an elder who commits excess
will be thoroughly disgraced.
This was the teaching of Ifa for Odu
When Odu arrived on earth.
Ah, theys said, “O you Odu;”
They said “you must be careful.
You must be patient.
And you must not be shamelessly disrespectful.”
Odu asked “why?”
They said “it is because of the power
Which Olodumare has given you.”
Ah! Agba ti o ba se aseju tite nii te.

A difa fun Odu
Nigbati Odu dele aye.
Ha! Won ni “Iwo, Odu.”
Won ni “o ba sora re.
Ki o si se suuru.
Odu ni “eetiri?”
Won ni nitori agbara re
Ti Olodumare fun un.

The claims of this poem are also supported by the story of the mythical journey of
Orunmila which resulted in the neglect of his wife for sixteen years. It once happened that
Orunmilan was invited to the abode of Olokun. He promised to return in seventeen days and embarked on the journey alone without the company of his wife. Although, it is true that did not deliberately neglect of his wife for sixteen years as the story goes, Orunmilan did not punish or molest his wife (contrary to what many other men who would claim to be acting in conformity with African culture would do today) for her unfaithfulness which resulted to the wife having additional three before his arrival from the abode of Olokun where instead of the seventeen days had spent sixteen years.

Ifa (an ancient wisdom, repository of knowledge, and an encyclopedia of Yorubá culture) therefore teaches that the Creator gives each person his/her power, authority and right without subduing one over the other and perhaps putting men under the rightful care of women, it does not in any way support beating of wife for the faults of the husband. Instead, God gives each sex some authorities commensurate to their nature and each person accepts his or her own blame. The picture of gender equality in Ifa appears more lucid than certain presentations in the Christian bible.

In the two narratives of Ifa, a few conclusions stand out clearly. One, that women are mothers of the world and sustainers of the world. The first poem encourages a joint effort with the father of the world to reproduce and insure continuity and to nurture the world. It depicts women as sustainers of the world, a role with a close affinity with the role of Olodumare. It could also be inferred that women are the custodians of wisdom in the world. In addition, the second story is a teaching on how one who is an elder and powerful should act, especially towards others. It begins by asserting that an elder will lose respect if she commits excesses. The moral prohibition against excess (aseju) indicates the need to avoid extremities and abuse of power and it in some ways corresponds to the theory of the golden mean and implies that power does not necessary corrupt. A balanced person becomes a model of the moral person one has no habits or tendencies which lead to disgrace, self-destruction or self-diminishing.

The choice of Odu as the name of the first woman and the name of the verses of the divination corpus is neither a mistake nor a mere coincidence. Rather, it indicates the position of women as the interpreter and channel of transmission of the classical Yoruba tradition, and consequently the custodians of knowledge, wisdom and world order (Makinde, 2004, 164–174). As indicated in the first poem, a respect for women is tantamount to a respect for knowledge, wisdom, peace, development, orderliness and positive progress (Karenge, 1999, ii, Abimbola, 1975).

There may have been several instances of women abuse and suppression in Africa, or even cases of such treatment by prominent Africans during the pre-colonial or post-colonial era. This, however, does not provide sufficient grounds to argue that the African culture inhibits gender equality. The particular attitude or practice of an individual cannot be taken as the cultural norm. Any particular instance is already coloured by the peculiarity of the individual figures involved. It may also help to use more practical examples (with reference to women as wives) to explain misconceptions regarding the social status of women in Africa.

Among the Yoruba, the term for wife is 'Iyawo,' etymologically given as i or in-ya-woo meaning 'one who is worth being admired'. This may be seen as an invitation to people passing by to behold somebody admirable. Among the Igbo, a wife (usually a woman) is referred to as 'oriaku,' which can be translated as 'one who has come to enjoy wealth'. In the Hausa and Fulani-speaking cultures, wives stay and enjoy themselves at home while the men work under the harsh tropical sun of the sub-Saharan region fending for their wives. It is commonplace to see men go to buy or sell in the market, rear the cattle, farm and go in search of water, while the women remain at home. In traditional settings, allowing women to compete with men in the largely physical energy-driven economies of Africa would amount to exploitation. They were often not even expected to take up jobs outside of their homes or to work for a salary.
If preventing women from harsh working conditions counts as abuse, then, expecting them to rival men in output should be seen as even worse abuse. However, because of the role assigned to men to provide economic sustenance for their families, there seems to be a tendency among men to exploit women. It can be expected that those men who do so would want to back up their misdeeds with claims that such treatment is part of their culture or tradition.

From the analysis of the paper, it is acknowledged that it may be true that some African men mistreat the women folk as second class citizens or as inferior to their male counterparts and claim that they do so is in keeping with the customs and traditions of Africa. The paper however argues that there are some other more reliable sources of information to prove that Africans do in fact consider women as equal with men and treat them with deep respect. And that the submissiveness of their women folk is not necessarily as a result intimidation, but as a consequence of the humility that should attend and complement their God-given power and authority over the world.

Consequently, what we now refer to as African cultural as a result of which they abuse women or discriminate against them in any form may only in some narrow ways be classified as African culture. It may for most part be considered as an ignorance of the culture, or an abuse of the African culture. If the teachings of Ifa is deemed fit to be classified as an African culture at least in the sense in which the Bible is considered as a Western culture and the Quran is considered an Arabian tradition, then we have sufficient reasons to argue that do not culturally discriminate against people on the basis of their gender.

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