

## **WOMEN AND CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Women still face cultural challenges that tend to deter their hope and determination to protect their role and folks in the face of the social change of the contemporary era. Who is a contemporary woman? One may ask. Is she the woman who do not respect or regard culture; the woman who prefer foreign culture which she feels is superior or the woman who despite her respect for culture do not resist change but sees it as a space for improvement. However, there are certain aspects of culture that keeps the Nigerian woman behind the scene in the scheme of events, for example circumcision, religion, woodcarving, ironsmith, widowhood, job selection, child marriage or indirect betrothal. It will be frowned at for a woman to cut palm fruit or tap palm wine or climb a tree. Also such women cannot accept change perhaps because they felt that to accept change is to fight nature, to exhibit weakness which they are often accused of, or to deny the faith which they strongly profess. To such women, the subject of feminism, or the declaration of women's Human Right, is a misnomer and an abuse of tradition, culture or nature. This papers discourse is on some of these issues. It presents suggestions that can help change such myths or negative assumptions about contemporary feminism by Nigerian women.

**Keywords:** Women, Contemporary Feminism, Cultural, Challenges, Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary woman in Nigeria seems to be in a lot of dilemma because of various transformations in the life style of the people perhaps caused by the new philosophy that is prompted and promoted by a somewhat globalized world. Migration caused by various factors, the Information Communication Technology (ICT), religion, culture, marriage, education, economy, and politics, had witnessed a lot of changes in recent times that it has drastically affected the lives of the female gender in Nigeria. The fact that a woman lives in the rural setting does not make her less informed about the social change around her country. The fact that culture prohibits a lot of practices by women also does not make the modern women afraid to act even against the traditional norms. This is why the call for 'feminism' cannot be said to be the

main reason for women liberation from negative traditional ties. Seemingly, most of the new practices are inevitable and could not be prevented because of the factors surrounding the growth of the new woman. The new philosophy perhaps presupposes the dictates of an evolving nature of issues against the new woman than the “declaration for the Women’s Human Right”.

Women are the custodian of procreation. This is her legacy to the world. This fact is inalienably a condition that cannot be contested. Man’s cohabitation with the woman cannot be compromised for any form of isolation. The natural gender image is a course and nature’s process order. One cannot exist without the other. They coexist in an ecosystem. But where we are concerned, generally is in the roles and occupations that give structure to the society. Until the issue of the female gender is taken seriously, the society, polity, or human assumptions may not come to terms with the insidious Part they play in the construction or destruction of a society.

The past is rife with cases of negative influences (which may be regarded as indirect dominations of the male world) on the female gender. The making of the society in most cases depends on the role the female gender plays in that society. Modern influence has affected the psyche, and the philosophy of the new society. Female battering or gender oppression by cultures now assumes different forms. To punish a woman a man may not only beat but deny her rights. This is unnecessary and detrimental to the society where a modern woman can fight her mate without words or physical actions. There is an Igbo adage that a man destroyed by a woman does not bleed. This is an aspect of the negative view of men about women. In Igbo society, there was a belief that unless you start early to oppress a young wife (by beating or harassment even when she has not done anything) it will not be easy for her to dominate or intimidate the husband in future. Just as the Athenian culture of the past, there was a time when the society upholds the women and a period she became the slave of the society and accused of all the woes of her partner, the man. They believed that often the power of the mother surpasses that of the husband especially, when the children have grown (male children to be precise). The children can always protect their mother: therefore men could instill fear in the wife early before the children grow up. Other cultural factors which will be discussed in this study as have been mentioned come under, widowhood, religion, circumcision, ironsmith, woodcarving, job selection, child selection and suggestions on the new roles and how one can control those negative aspects of culture that intimidates the woman creating a wide knowledge gap between what would have enriched equal participation of both parties. These factors encourage wife battering, rape within marriage, FGM, early child marriage (Against violence, Against Women: Baobab-for Women’s Human Right), taboos for the female gender, some of which have been mentioned. The term “wife” (who must always submit, good or bad on her person) who should not speak in the public or challenge the husband, no matter the circumstances, stays mute even at humiliating conditions. These conditions encourage violence.

Some cultures are still rejecting modern ideas against female circumcision. Some act based on choice and not because it is a new trend. Early child marriage is still practiced indirectly. Some parents still feel that it is a waste and unnecessary to make a child girl literate with the idea that she will rise up to challenge the husband or have her way or will no more be loyal to a man. These they feel might make her not to get a husband which is very important to her family.

## **WOMEN AND CULTURE**

Culture is a way of life of a people. It may determine a people's progress or failure. It can make a people backward amongst her compeers. Today we talk about development, civilization and enlightenment. All these are words to describe the progress of a society. We discuss the growth of American, European or the development in an Oriental government. Japanese are known for her technology in recent times. About a hundred and sixty years ago, it was a civilization that was still 'undeveloped according to today standard. There was Chinese ancient civilization. Malaysia, Dubai, and Taiwan were all embracing modern development. They also had their ancient development. But we are looking at progress of today. Most countries that also had their ancient civilization cannot boast of modern development. In this case we can say that they are backward. At that time, man had not gone to the moon or the mars. The first people to rise in technology today can be said to be at the forefront of civilization. We may not be wrong to say that it is the outcome of a people's culture.

Culture is dynamic and it is in this dynamism that growth often comes; that is moving with the trend of events that precipitates change. Some cultures have been left behind. Such cultures are said to be backward. The world does not wait for any society that resists change or refuses to move. This is why most cultures are backward today. They lack the ability to appreciate the new world. Capacity building or structure of the present society is a major problem. They fail to follow the light because they felt it may distort or discourage their tradition. But reasonable societies weigh the coin and follow where they can benefit, dropping used or old ideas that may no more be useful in the present. Thus, religion or certain culture remains stagnant for a very long time unless it is moved by force, by a higher ideal other than theirs.

Today globalization holds sway and the world is like a little village. We can talk to each other in seconds comfortably from any part of the world as we are physically facing each other. This new life has affected gender role globally.

This study is on how culture and modern development has affected the modern day woman. Culture itself is part of us. This is our trademark. It has also brought us forward to where we are but we are looking at aspects of culture that has prevented growth. It seems to have favoured the male gender more than the interest of the female gender. Although the modern Nigerian woman

has been liberated, it is mainly in theory not entirely in action. There are aspects of culture that still intimidate her and that is what this paper is all about.

### **Some Barriers to the Women folk in Modern Times**

#### **Tradition:**

Most of these barriers can be tied to traditional or cultural orientation. The rise of women in the modern world has not been easy, or adequately welcomed by the men folk because what tradition or culture had given the men as an orientation is dwindling away in their relationship with each other. There is the friction here and there and it has broken many homes. For example, when a woman who should kneel to hand over the food she cooked to her husband and also thank him after he ate the food is no more concerned about these protocols or courtesy but seats to eat with him eyeball to eyeball, has brought a lot of friction in the relationship. A woman who feeds her husband and children in the modern world will not kneel to give food to her beneficiary. It will be cheating to do that. Things are changing. Men can now cook for the family, especially if they want to show love for their families. Then it may be abnormal but not now. Meanwhile most women of this century are engaged in one job or the other like the men in order to support the family. They now share responsibilities to help the relationship so that the woman can be relieved of the slogan, burden bearer.

#### **Osu (outcast) or Ohu(slave):**

This factor still affect the modern day world especially in Igbo society. Most people believe that it is a curse on one who married an osu. Also the issue of the free born, social status, tribe or religion holds some female world hostage. Nevertheless, it has been played down drastically in recent times in Nigeria. For example, there are marriages between Muslims and Christians, inter-tribal marriages. The tie of taboos have been demystified in most cases. Yet some individuals or families still hold very firmly to their conviction about these factors.

#### **Religion:**

Belief in different religions has turned accusing finger on tradition and values of the past as the cause of many present problems. They create demons where they do not exist. And women are usually faithful followers of the new faith. They no more believe in physical properties or mental exercise as nature provides which exists in principles. They rather prefer the miracle performance of things than physical labour which lies in natures language of "sowing and reaping."

Though in a much wider perspective it may not be noticeable but when it comes to man woman relationship there are questions to be asked; who are you? What is your family background like, and your past life. Where are you from - what is your tradition. There is always this question time-origin, tradition, more than the individual character. With the Human Right Declaration everybody has an independent right to exist, to chose or do what one likes provided it does not impinge on the neighbours right.

The Aegean civilization and the ancient Athenian used as example: Osu, Widow, Widow hood, inheritance, child pawning-modern day slavery, kind of child trafficking.

### **Issues in Women Liberation**

**Hate Language:** Hate language is often a sign of discrimination.

**Single parenthood:** Can this situation keep her happy?: Some women insist on single parenthood to be free from the man.

**Self made prostitutes:** Some females see it as a last result to survive.

**Insult:** Some females use this empowerment or platform as a leverage to insult.

Nevertheless, this depends on the perceptive nature of the culture that society or the evolving trends on gender behavior or security.

Following the laws on these issues, ethics should be observed. Otherwise laws should be enforced. There should be law reforms to make such issues criminal or civil, depending on the capacity, instead of making it just welfare or counseling matter.

### **Universal Culture as it Affects the Female Gender**

The Universal nature of the female gender can be gleaned from the assessment of some world cultures. For example, the Greek civilization taught the world a lot of things. One of their important gifts to the world is democracy. These are examples of the status of woman that can be used as a standard to assess what obtains elsewhere.

In as much as the Greek civilization invented democracy which is now a legacy to some societies of the world, "they also helped to destroy the same Society which they gave democracy by encouraging slavery arid emphasizing the inferior status of woman". (Bonnard, 1957). This is one of the main failures of ancient civilization.

Of course, democracy simply denotes equality amongst all the citizens. In a population of 400,000 citizens, 200,000, were slaves during that time in Greece.

The woman lived like the slave in this ancient culture. An ancient philosopher defined slavery as an “animated tool kind of machine that had the advantage of being able to understand and execute the orders given it. The slave was an instrument belonging to another man; he was his “thing”. Even the law did not protect her. She is more of an object of property. The masters interest is the slaves interest and could be punished as at when due. So that most women in Greek civilization would prefer to die than to be a slave woman. There were cases of suicide by such women. The general status of woman then was that of pity.

### **An example of ancient tradition that promoted women**

Before the Greek was Aegean civilization. There is a matriarchal regime. The head of the family was the mother “the greatest deities were the women who presided over fertility” the man was the hunter while the woman not only brought up children but domesticated animal, cultivate plant and keep the house. The woman chose the man who would give her children. The Greek found this people on the land where they later settled as Greek people. Here the woman was the head of the family, the Greeks borrowed two aspects of culture here — mother earth, Demeter and Greek mother Cybele. This society were peace loving; “the palace of Cnossos was unfortified”.

They practiced agriculture, and this reminds us that it was woman who, by establishing agriculture, had brought mankind to a sedentary life, which is an essential stage in mans progress. Among the Cretan peoples, woman enjoyed great prestige and still dominated the community.

The situation was different in the Democratic Athens. Often the literature that promoted women in Greek civilization is only seen in literature, the stage or in imagination not reality. Most of the Greek literature painted woman as bad.

Hesiod, an ancient Greek author wrote about woman as ‘that fair monster’, Simonides of Amorgo in his poem likened woman to an animal. It gives an example of a fox-woman whose husband “cannot keep her quiet, even by breaking her teeth with a stone”.

In the New Greek culture, monogamy may not favour a woman. The man is now the master. The woman does not choose her husband. A man married for the sake of ‘procreation of legitimate children’.

“Love marriages were non-existent”(Bonnard,1957).

The man was at least thirty years old, the woman only fifteen”. It was like a contract. The man can sack the wife anytime provided he returns the dowry or pay interest on it. If the woman should ask for divorce it may not be granted. There was no law binding on the man on the misconduct of infidelity except on the woman. “the husband did not deny himself wither concubines or courtesans or courtesans. Demosthenes is reported to have declared in one of his speeches: we have courtesans for our pleasure, concubines for our comfort and wives to give us legitimate children.

A legitimate wife must be of a daughter of a citizen. She is an inferior gender from birth till death and her marriage only means a change from one guardian to the other. If her husband dies she became her eldest son’s child. She did not go to market, known her husband’s friends or accompany him to ceremonies, parties etc. the concubines are seen in such places. ‘her only business was to bear children. She trains her daughter for the life she lives. She was simply an object, the first of her husband servants.

**Concuninage was part of Athenians life style in the classical era:**

a land of half-marriage, half-prostitution. This was the foundation of the growth of notable Athenian women. It is more like the women found in politics today. An example is the lady Aspasia; a brilliant sophist. Pericles sacked his wife because of his love for Aspasia. Aspasia was the daughter of a Milesian. Pericles installed Aspasia in his own house. In this house she had a salon. Despite people’s insults and campaign, Pericles still imposed her on Athenian society. He was a true female friend. This shows that for a woman to acquire a real personality she must be a good courtesan. Even Plato tolerated concubinage provided men conceal them to avoid scandal. Most of the slaves (low-class citizens) dominated Athenian brothel. A young man could have one Obol (official prostitute) in order to keep moral and public order (that is to avoid rape etc).The question may be, when did woman fall to this humiliating situation in Greek civilization? This could be seen in the “discovery of metal and the development of war as a profitable industry”.

With the fall of Aegean civilization women lost Monogamous marriage which was established. This was because man, the lord of war, wished to transmit the wealth that war procured him to children of whom e was certain of being the father. Hence monogamous marriage, which made the legitimate wife an agent of procreation, and other women objects of amusement or pleasure.

Women lost their position long ago and have not everywhere recovered it. For example, the right of voting. Athenian women, according to an English Hellenist, possessed the right to vote in about the 10 century BC. Luripides treatment of women in his poetry was considered as the points of view of misogyny. He suffered for not respecting Pericles opinion about women - for men to be silent regarding female matters. Bonnard in his Greek Civilization stated that "this natural attitude to women had social consequences that were much more serious than expected." This means that man is incapable of loving women which is not true no matter how one looks at it.

However, Bonnard goes on to state this fact:

Excluded as she was from civic life, women, as much as the slave called for a society and civilization which would restore not only equality between the sexes, but the dignity and humanity which were her right.

And that is why as has been stated, it was among women as much as among slaves that Christianity extended its sway.  
and so he asks:

How many revolutions were needed and will still be needed, since the Christian revolutions, to rescue women from the abyss into which her great historical defeat plunged her?

It is only in this way that women and slavery in Athenian Democracy failed and became degraded. Another question is, in what way can we compare the ancient Athenian culture to the Nigerian culture in respect of the female gender and what were her recent development that sees women free from the culture chains of that past: remnants of that tradition which still intimidated or degraded the female gender when we know that to place gender on equal balance human progress would be more rapid.

**Suggestions:**

Suggestions on how to help remove factors of culture that bare women from full and equal participation with men in the world are listed thus:

1. Education - this system will help to demystify taboos placed by culture on women. Seminars, workshops, conferences and media adverts will quicken this exposure.
2. Laws banning the use of hate language or discrimination should be expanded as a serious offence.



3. Task force to checkmate any cultural barrier or situation, that can put the female gender on the pressure of submitting to intimidation and obeying wrong motives or doing something against her will should be encouraged.
4. The female gender should be encouraged to participate in leadership capacities so that she can help the women win their own conscience on what is right than to do what she does not know or understand, whether it is right or wrong.
5. Creating opportunities to serve the public by government through free training.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the modern woman in Nigeria is seen as a new personality that can be compared to her counterpart in a much more developed society, there are still strings that tie her down, that keep her in a cage, that have not given her that freedom or right to participate fully in her course of life and equally with men. Some of these barriers have been mentioned above. Nevertheless, the women folk are getting free from these ties gradually. More efforts should be encouraged by the agency of education and government to hasten women's fully developed potentials as co-partners in a developing economy, to help their societies rise quickly.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Education can go a long way in changing perspectives depending on what is valuable to the new society and what is not no matter the cultural or traditional orientation.

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