

An Argument for Gender Equality in Africa

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Abstract: In his article "An Argument for Gender Equality in Africa" Cyril-Mary P. Olatunji addresses the problematics of gender inequality in Black African society. Many scholars working on African Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures have had something to say about the treatment of women and the topic of gender inequality in Africa. Some suggest(ed) that the roots of women's oppression are to be sought in customs and traditions and so despite of a legal system that guarantees women rights in Africa. Olatunji's objective is to advance the current discussion on the issue using the method of simple philosophical analysis, an argument from a legitimately African origin proposing a re-examination of the widespread belief among Afro-critics, as well as Afro-apologetic scholars that treatment of women as second class or inferior folk is indigenous to Africa.

Cyril-Mary P. OLATUNJI

An Argument for Gender Equality in Africa

The twentieth- and twenty-first 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, political ideology, 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. With regard to race studies, in the United States Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1983 *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color* represents an important publication in the 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. Moraga and 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 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 (see, e.g., Berger and Guidroz). Despite the continuous struggle and recent international conferences 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 (see Mutume). Few African women occupy positions of power which would contribute to improve the situation. Equal representation of women in a government cabinet could only be found in few places such as Liberia, the Republic of South Africa and perhaps only in Nigeria where some of the most coveted portfolios of the Minister of Finance (Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala) and the Minister of Petroleum (Diezani Alison-Madueke) are held by women and the Minister of Communication and Technology (Omobola Johnson) and the Minister of Women's Affairs (Hajia Zainab Maina) are also women. J. Biegon and M. Killander state that only two women sat as judges of the African Court of the African Union prior to 2009 (295-311). Regardless of whether the situation is better in other parts of the world, the underrepresentation of women in politics and governance in Africa is an apparent indication of gender inequality (see, e.g., Scholte). Although isolated examples of women pharaohs in Egypt, Queen Amina of Zaria, and Queen Idia of the Benin kingdom come to mind. The few 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 equal representation in social and political spheres exist or existed in Africa (see Skaine). History is 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 patriarchal socio-economic system. This includes ethnic discrimination, as well as the 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. 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 193). Several models of solution have been suggested and 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 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 have captured the interest of international civil rights movements (see Akinseye-George 97). 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 Hafkin and Bay).

There are usually two schools of thought regarding the treatment of women in Africa. One includes Afro-cultural critics (Uchem) who maintain that women are treated like second-class citizens in Africa (see, e.g., Bryceson; Jules-Rosette). Some scholars have pointed out that scholars from outside Africa do not really understand the particular situations despite their campaigns for women-empowerment (see Connah 2). The second group of Afro-cultural apologists hold 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 (see, e.g., Dzurgba; Maillu) and 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 that "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" (89) and in the case of Nigeria 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" (Aluko 19). Whatever the case, 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 and 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.

I posit the following questions: is this conception and treatment of women specific to African societies? 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 African societies and cultures and their customs. Without necessarily trying to suggest answers to any or all of the above questions, I argue 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 second class or inferior is specific to Africa or that African cultures and customs are responsible for gender discrimination and gender inequality.

By looking back at Indigenous traditions, in the article at hand I inquire into the historical bases of discriminative situations in contemporary African societies. In a number of 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, fragile, and tender and protect them from 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 they could participate in the cult of the *gelede* dance, but they are not to 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 I do not 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 did D.G. Maillu struggle to argue against minds of presumably Afro-critics regarding the thorny issue of polygamy. In *Our Kind of Polygamy* Maillu, using examples drawn from different parts

of Africa — although with more attention on the cultures of the East and South Africa — distinguishes between polygamy in Africa and polygamy in the Western world. Maillu identifies two forms of polygamy: consecutive and simultaneous polygamy. In his analysis, Maillu polarises between African and the Western cultures. Although, the simultaneous type of polygamy in which a man has more than one wife at the same time without disowning any is 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 African culture (if at all it is possible to talk of an African culture in a manner that portrays Africa as a single culture, which is certainly not the case). While scholars of the Afro-optimist bent like Maillu defend certain practices as indigenously African, Afro-critics employ a blanket generalization to demonize the same practices in question. Even in the 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 developing nations especially the West African sub-region (see, e.g., Goldstein; Okin; Singh and Samara).

adegbehood for instance is one of the traditional practices in Africa that perhaps could appear strange to an average Westerner or Asian: it is a system practiced in Isua-Akoko, a boundary town between Ondo and Edo state towards the northeastern boundary of Ondo state in West Africa. In the practice, any family where there is no male child one of the female children is chosen and dedicated to the family to take the position of a male in order to be in a position to perform the duties, functions, and rites that ordinarily should have been performed by a son of the family (and 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 and 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 (see *Abisomo; Agunbiade*). The former see *adegbe* as a combination of *Adele*, a regent in Yoruba language and *gbe* signifying perfection of permanence in the Isua dialect and put together it means a permanent regent. The latter group sees the concept as describing the fact the girl child has not been perfectly or permanently purchased. In the Isua dialect "ae" or "ai" is a negation of "a" such as a prefix "not," "im," or "un," are negations of "possible," "common," and "usual." In addition "de" means purchase or bought, while as said *gbe* indicates perfection or permanence. It means altogether that the maiden has not been perfectly purchased. It is not uncommon to find a girl child in a male-less family freely offering herself for *adegbehood*. This occasional volition, wherever it occurs, gives the impression that the girl's freedom of choice is a factor always considered in practice. However, in practice instead there have been families where their choices of candidate for *adegbehood* were influenced by hatred and jealousy. However, whether or not the freedom of the girl child is considered, the system of *adegbehood* itself is meant to protect the interest of the family rather than the good of the girl child herself. Although 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 above described typical attitude is not limited to cultural issues because social and political discourses on Africa tend to follow the same pattern. Based on the arguments of scholars that Africa is a communitarian society, Thaddeus Metz also employs the example of the practice and debates on "Ubuntu" especially in South Africa to support his ambitious project of giving "Ubuntu" a critical theoretical outlook. 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 circumstances be removed or changed, 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 which 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 postcolonial, postconflict and multiethnic 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.

Scholars such as Moses Akin Makinde and Segun Ogungbemi argue in different fashions that the problems are a result of contact with some external or foreign cultures. Ali Mazrui believes that multiple factors have contributed to the problems; Moses Oke argues that the problems originates from within Africa itself while Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall on the contrary argue that blaming the problems on external factor is an untenable position. Instead, they insist that the problems originates in Indigenous cultures themselves. Mbembe's and Nuttall's position is akin to the position what I am arguing for, namely that the problems — although cannot be blamed on any external influence — 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 analyzing the problems explains that problems of explanation regarding African arts and cultures defiles any definite explanation. That is, how do we account for the origin of the problem if external forces are held responsible for the problem, how can we depend on any solution which depends on the efficiency of a people for a solution to a problem they could ordinarily have prevented in the first place. In particular, 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 cloths, hair treatment, and social interaction for a period up to nine months, following the death of their spouses (on motherhood in African cultures, see, e.g., Akujobi). And 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.

The Ifa corpus among Yoruba is one of the compendia of ancient African knowledge and consequently as a collection of wisdom, religion, morality, and culture. It is also regarded by the Yoruba people as the source of intellectual development. Ifa is a common practice among Yoruba communities in Nigeria, Benin, Togo and it also receives widespread 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 (on Ifa see, e.g., Abimbola; Epega; Oke; Pogonson and Akande).

One of the *odu* (thematic section) of Ifa that is relevant to my discussion is *osa meji*. It is supported by the mythical consequences of marital neglect by Orunmila and the poem of *osa meji*:

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), 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 Olodumare, Lord of Heaven, 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."	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 nigbati 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 se O ni oun o fun won l'ase ti won o maa fi se Ti yio si fi maa dara Odu ni: Iwo Olodumare; 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 O ni iwo o o si mu ile aye ro Olodumare l'o ba fun oun l'agbara
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<p>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 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. Obarisa said that people should always respect women greatly. For if they respect women greatly, the world will be in right order Pay homage; give respect to women. Indeed, it is women who brought us into being 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. Ah, an elder who commits excess will be thoroughly disgraced. This was the teaching of Ifa for Odu When Odu arrived on earth. Ah, they 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."</p>	<p>Nigbati o fun oun l'agbara, o fun oun l'agbara eye Ni o gbe fun obirin l'ase wipe gbogbo ohun yio wu, Okunrin ko gbodo le da nkankan se l'ehin obirin. Odu ni gbogbo ohun ti eniyan ba nse, Ti ko ba fi ti obirin kun un, O ni ko le se se. Obarisa ni ki won o maa fi iba fun obirin O ni ti won ba ti nfi iba fun obirin, Ile aye yoo maa toro. E kunle o; e kunle f'obirin, o. Obirin l'o bi wa K'awa to d'eniyan. Ogbon aye t'obirin ni. E kunle f'obirin. Obirin l'o bi wa 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. Ki o ma yaaju. Odu ni "eetiri?" Won ni nitori agbara re Ti Olodumare fun un.</p>
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(Karenga 72-87)

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 Orunmila 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 he did not neglect of his wife deliberately for sixteen years as the story goes, Orunmila did not punish or abuse 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 the wife having additional three children before his arrival from the abode of Olokun where instead of the seventeen days had spent sixteen years. Ifa 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 and it does not in any way support beating of wife for the faults of the husband. Instead, God gives each gender some authorities commensurate to their nature and each person accepts his/her own blame. I submit that the picture of gender equality in Ifa appears more lucid than certain presentations in the Bible.

In the two narratives of Ifa, a few conclusions stand out clearly. One is that women are mothers of the world and sustainers of the world. The 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, it is a teaching on how one who is an elder and how the powerful should act 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 the abuse of power and this in some ways corresponds to the theory of the golden mean and implies that power does not necessarily corrupt. A balanced person becomes a model of the moral person and one has no habits or tendencies which lead to disgrace, self-destruction, or self-diminishing. Further, 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 interpreters and channels of transmission of the classical Yoruba tradition and consequently

the custodians of knowledge, wisdom, and world order (see Makinde). As indicated in the poem, a respect for women is tantamount to a respect for knowledge, wisdom, peace, development, orderliness and positive progress (see Abimbola; Karenga).

There abuse and suppression of women in Africa remains endemic and in my opinion this requires change instead of the argumentation that African cultures ought to respect and maintain the status quo with regard to women's adherence to tradition. The particular attitude or practice of an individual cannot be taken as the cultural norm. Any particular instance is already colored 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 is also 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 families. 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.

It may be true that some African men mistreat women 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 fact however is 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 respect and that the submissiveness of women 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 I refer to as a misleading paradigm as a result of which many contemporary Black Africans 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, a corruption 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 Western culture and the Quran is considered Arab culture, then we have sufficient reasons to argue that Black Africans also believe that to discriminate against people on the basis of gender is wrong.

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